

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a green long-sleeved dress with a dark apron, stands in a magical forest at night. She is holding a small yellow frog in her hands. The background features a wooden mill with a large water wheel, surrounded by trees and glowing blue and yellow lights. The sky is dark blue with a bright sun or moon in the upper right corner. The overall atmosphere is whimsical and enchanting.

NINA CLARE

MIDSUMMER MADNESS

The Jane Austen Fairy Tales 3
A variation of Emma

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NINA CLARE

THE JANE AUSTEN FAIRY TALES

*Midsummer
Madness*

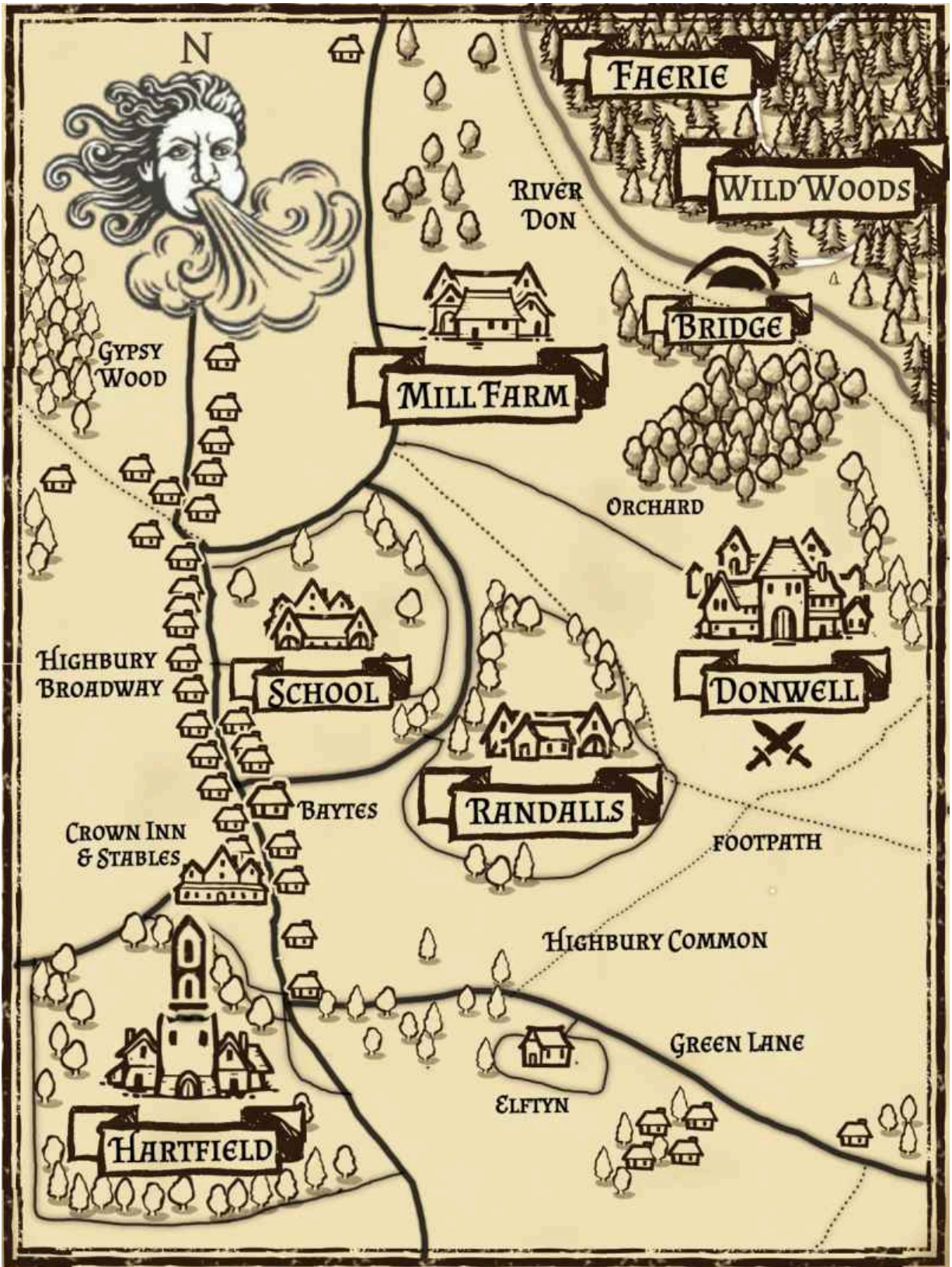
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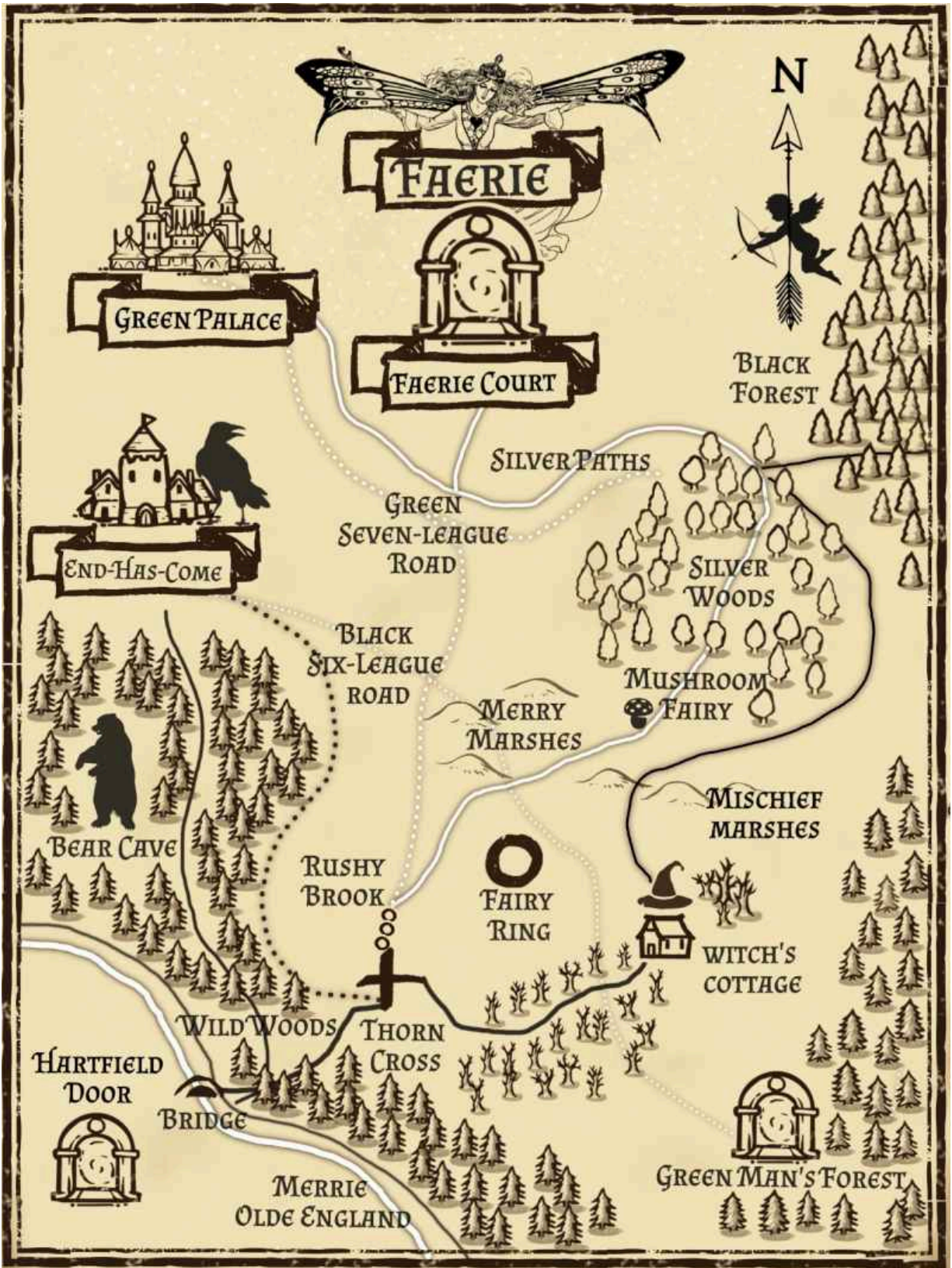


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Free Fairy Tale Novel
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A MUCH DARKER NIGHT

‘E veryone, go home directly!’ Master Knightley’s strong voice carried above the murmurs of the ballroom. No one argued or demurred, but all rushed to gather up their belongings and make a hasty departure.

‘I shall not leave Emma,’ Mistress Weston insisted, the only person in the room who would resist even Master Knightley for the sake of Emma.

‘Please,’ Master Knightley said, addressing both the Westons, ‘I brought Mistress Baytes and her niece by carriage, have the goodness to see them home in yours.’

‘Certainly,’ said Master Weston, eager to get his wife away.

‘I shall escort them,’ cried Frank. ‘They shall come to no harm while I am by!’ And he rushed to find Mistress Baytes.

Mistress Baytes had been much alarmed by the strange appearance of the wild young lady and her claims that a witch was coming! She could not get dear Jane to the safety of home quick enough, and begged they might walk home with all haste, for they would get there on foot quicker than waiting for the carriage and horses to be brought round.

Frank Charmall agreed that this was so, and bore the tremulous aunt on one arm, and the pale niece on the other, and it would be hard to say which lady held on to him tightest.

Mistress Baytes hurried ahead for the last few steps that she might rap on the door and call for Patty to open up quickly.

‘Oh, Frank,’ Jane said, when her aunt had left them. She spoke it so softly that none should hear it but him.

‘All will be well,’ he replied, just as softly.

‘Will it?’

‘It will,’ was the more determined answer, but a tic pulsed at his jaw and his eyes mirrored her own strained expression.

‘We are so obliged to you for attending us safely home, Master Charmall,’ said Mistress Baytes, calling from the opened doorway, her voice quicker and higher than usual, ‘but now I must bolt the door, indeed I must – a witch! Oh, my!’

The young people shared one last look before Jane was pulled inside, and the bolt duly drawn.

FRANK MADE HASTE TO RANDALLS, knowing his father and stepmother would be anxious for his return. He longed for the relative safety he experienced when he passed between the protective charms of the stone lions at the gateway. If only he could remain within them, he might always be safe, but of what use was safety if there was no freedom? It was only another form of captivity.

He had a strong presentiment that he would not reach those stone lions before some influence arrested him, and as he rounded the last bend in the lane, he saw that it was so.

His step slowed, as he made his way reluctantly towards the messenger. The black crow-like bird could not pass the charm upon the lions, nor the iron of the gates, so it perched on the decorative urn flanking the entrance. The messenger cawed its impatience at Frank’s slow step, and when Frank reached out to take the missive, the bird gave a little peck of Frank’s thumb.

‘Ow,’ yelped Frank. ‘Do you have to be so vicious? I’ve not done anything wrong.’

But the crow mounted up, its black wings flapping, and Frank ducked to avoid being struck in the head as the bird flew away.

The black wax seal was splurged on the note like a globule of gore. He longed to rip it up and cast it from him; it was harder to have her thrust herself upon his will when he was across the border. The brief taste of freedom he felt when physically away from her was heady, and he longed for more of it. But even as he thought these rebellious things, the band beneath his cravat pulsed in warning and tightened. He gritted his teeth and tore open the seal, moving beneath the lantern light at the gatepost.

Bridge. One hour after dawn.

That was all the note said. Frank crumpled it up and lifted the latch on the gates.

‘Is that you, Frank?’ called Master Weston from the door of Randalls.

‘Yes, sir! Only me.’

‘Come in, quickly! Mistress Weston has been anxious for you. What an evening! What do you make of it, Frank? A witch! A witch in Highbury, after all these years, and you only just come back to us.’ Master Weston glanced over his shoulder to ensure no one was overhearing them. He lowered his usually loud voice. ‘It’s nothing to do with... you know... is it, Frank?’

Frank shrugged and sighed and shook his head all at the same time. ‘I cannot say, sir. I simply cannot say. I wish I could.’ He winced as he spoke the last words, and tugged at his cravat.

‘Well, you’d best get up to bed,’ Master Weston advised. ‘I’ll have Norris bring up hot milk and brandy. We need a nightcap after such an evening. We’ll talk after breakfast, my boy.’

‘Actually, Father, I must leave before breakfast. My aunt has sent word. I must ride home at first light.’

‘But you’ve only just got here!’

‘I know. I wish it were not so. But I’m confident I’ll return soon.’

Master Weston sighed and ran his hands across his greying whiskers. ‘What a tyrant she is. I could wish things had been different, Frank.’

‘I know.’ Frank reached a hand out to touch his father’s shoulder as he passed him on the way to the stairs. ‘Good night, sir.’

‘Night, my boy. I’ll send up that nightcap. I daresay I won’t see you in the morning. I prodigiously like greetings, and prodigiously dislike farewells, so I’ll bid you anon.’

‘Just as I would wish it, Father. I’ll see you very soon, I’m sure of it.’

‘You’ll bid Mistress Woodhouse goodbye?’ Master Weston said, as Frank reached the stairs. ‘What a couple you made tonight.’ Master Weston sounded pleased and proud.

Frank paused on the first step. But he did not reply. He only cast a look that his father could not interpret over his shoulder and climbed up the stairs to bed.



MYRTLE HAD REFUSED to return to the school with Harriet after the ball. They stood outside the Crown Inn amid the bustle of fleeing carriages and horse.

‘I shan’t be able to sleep,’ Myrtle said. ‘I don’t feel tired. I feel full of Faerie, and it quite takes away the usual desires. I daresay the feeling will fade, but I’m wide awake for now. Besides,’ she added, ‘Cloe-Claws won’t let the margool in, and I’m not spending the night in that stone barn again.’

‘That’s true,’ said Harriet. ‘But perhaps Cloe-Claws can be reasoned with. If we explain that it’s not actually a dragon and it won’t burn down the school, she might let it in.’

‘I’m going to watch the bridge,’ said Myrtle. ‘I want to see if the witch comes over it. Rue said she was coming to cause trouble in Highbury.’

At the mention of Rue’s name, Harriet’s full measure of distress returned. ‘Oh, Myrtle, whatever shall we do to help her? Poor Rue – *a witch!*’

‘I don’t know as yet. I confess I was pinning all my hopes on the curse breaking as soon as I’d done what the Green Lady asked of me. Perhaps I missed something. Perhaps I didn’t do it right. Oh, Harriet, what’s all this Godmothering business worth if we can’t *do* anything? If all the power lies in other people’s hands and we’re just left waiting around for them to show up?’

Harriet could only nod in sad agreement. ‘I wish things could go back to how they were before. How happy we were when Mother Goodword was here, and the biggest worry we had was to find a match for our wards. That seems like so light a thing in compared to being captured by witches.’

‘Matchmaking,’ repeated Myrtle, her dark eyebrows drawing together. ‘How could I forget? The Green Lady said I was to stop a match – a betrothal that ought not to be made.’

‘Stop whose match?’

‘She didn’t say. Oh, Merciful Mushrooms, why do fae folk always talk in riddles? What’s wrong with just telling somebody in straightforward language exactly what they need to do!’ Myrtle groaned. ‘I’m going to the bridge. Go back to the school and make sure all the doors and windows have their protection charms in place.’

Harriet nodded and pulled her cloak about her against the chill of the night air. 'Come back for breakfast,' she urged, 'and let me know if you see anything. I don't think I shall sleep tonight either.'



VERY LITTLE SLEEP was had by anyone that night. Master Knightley had rushed home to throw off his dancing shoes and pull on his boots, and strap on his sword; if a witch was coming over the border, he would be the first to meet her!

He saw her on the Highbury side of the bridge; she was crouched down against the ancient rowan tree, which was odd, for darklings hated the feel of rowan. His hand moved to his hilt as soon as he saw that dark, hooded figure, and he slowly pulled Lightbringer out of its sheath and into the night.

A creature the size of a dog leapt a little way into the air, stretching a long neck towards Master Knightley, and making an excitable yip. A shaft of moonlight broke through a moving cloud, and the creature's head shone as silver as his sword.

'Who's there!' called the figure against the rowan tree, standing up. 'What are you doing here?' Master Knightley said, lowering his sword, 'I took you for a witch!'

'You would not be the first,' said Sister Myrtle. 'I'm watching the bridge to see if the witch dares cross over.'

'And what did you intend to do if she did? Set your dragon on her?'

'He's a margool.'

'And what exactly is a margool?'

With the moonlight falling upon him and his drawn sword, Master Knightley looked as one of the knights of old, the heroes of the Dragon War from whom he was descended.

'He poses no danger,' Myrtle said, moving to stand before her margool, her eyes on the sword.

Master Knightley returned his weapon to its sheath, and the fierce light in Sister Myrtle's eyes subsided a little.

'I daresay there would not be much I could do if the witch appeared,' said Myrtle. 'But at least I would see if my fellow Sister were with her or

not.'

'I suppose I won't be able to command you to go home,' said Master Knightley. 'You've enough green magic lingering about you to make me think you might even be useful here. Your senses will be heightened to all things fae. You will probably sense the approach of the witch, or any other darkling, sooner than I would.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Myrtle. 'Not tonight.'



EMMA WAS sure she had quite ruined her hands with all the vain pummelling upon the door of the tower. She'd hoped that her persistent knocking might bring her father to the door where she could plead with him to let her loose. But no one came, and she had broken a nail for no good purpose.

She could have sworn all manner of things if she were not a lady who despised vulgar language. She could have shrieked, if she were not a lady who detested raised voices. She could have wept if she were not a lady to spurn self-pity. She did give a few stamps of the foot, but they were fairly ladylike stamps, no harder than a dance step. She did emit a few sighs and groans, but eventually she concluded that there was no use in trying to get anyone's attention that night. No doubt Papa had taken a draught of watered-down wine and taken himself off to bed, believing his daughter to be as safe and sound as he could wish. She must hope for him coming to his senses in the morning. Master Knightley would contend for her, as would Mistress Weston. Surely Papa would release her on the morrow?

Meanwhile, she was too much roused up by the events of the evening to sleep. She took down the spyglass from its box and looked out of the window to see if there were anyone still abroad in the streets of Highbury, or if there were any wretched witch riding the night sky on her broomstick, or slinking over the shadowy bridge by the river.

She saw many lamps shining in Highbury, as people lit candles and torches and lanterns to dispel as much shadow as was possible. A witch did not care for the light, it was said. No doubt all manner of charms would be hung on the doors and at the windows in hopes of keeping her at bay.

With the spyglass, Emma could see in great detail, and though the ghostly bridge over the river looked empty, she thought she could see two figures down by the ancient rowan tree. It was too dark to see who it was, but a gleam of moonlight showed her a tall, upright figure marching up and down the bank, close to the tree.

It must be Master Knightley, keeping watch. Brave and noble soul that he was! Only an hour earlier they had danced together, such a rare thing for Master Knightley to dance, but he had danced first with Harriet, rescuing the poor dear from the humiliation of Master Elftyn refusing to dance with her. And then he had danced with herself, and though he had seemed serious and grave, nothing like Frank's bright humour, yet there had been something very delightful in that one dance. Something comfortable and steady.

While Frank Charmall was near, she thought of no one else, which was odd, now that she had time to consider it, for she had been quite sure of her own heart on that score. She had been quite certain that she did *not* love Frank Charmall, until his reappearance. It was not like her to be so wholly caught up in one person that she forgot all others, but that was the effect he had on her since his return. But away from Frank, standing opposite Master Knightley, there had not been an absence of pleasure, but the sensation of something else... what was it? It was a kind of peace. A restfulness. A *rightness*.

Her eyes felt weary of straining to see into the darkness. Perhaps things would look clearer in the morning when this dreadful night was over.

AN ALARMING CHANGE

It was an overcast morning as Frank left his father's house and the relative safety behind the stone lions.

His horse high-stepped along, not feeling the same reluctance as his master, but only feeling that it yearned for the native grass and air of Faerie.

Horse and rider reached the turn in the direction of the Donwell road, but Frank brought his horse to a halt and sat for a moment in the middle of the lane looking towards the direction of Highbury. 'I will see her, I will,' he murmured, and turned his horse towards the village.

From the her bedroom window, Mistress Weston watched her stepson ride away, one hand raised in greeting, though she knew he would not see it unless he looked back.

'He has taken the road to Highbury,' she said, turning her head towards her husband. 'I wonder why he went that way.'

'I think we can guess why, my dear,' replied Master Weston.

'Do you think so? Do you think he has gone to see her to say goodbye?'

'Depend upon on it, my dear. He is a man in love.'

Mistress Weston dropped the curtain back into place. 'They looked well together last night, did they not?'

'They belong together. Anyone with half a brain could not fail to see that.'

Mistress Weston sighed happily. 'Dearest Emma. She deserves the best man in all the world.'

'And she has got him, to be sure,' her husband assured her. 'He'll be back before we know it, mark my words. Not even that aunt of his could keep a man in love from his lady.'

FRANK DID NOT RIDE to Hartfield. He rode to the top of Highbury broadway, and collared a delivery boy, promising him thruppence to hold his horse for half a minute. He rapped impatiently at the door in the street and a middle-aged woman in an apron and cap answered it.

‘Morning, Patty. Be so good as to call your young mistress. I’ve something to return to her.’

‘All the mistresses are abed, sir,’ said Patty. ‘Don’t you know what time it is? It’s barely an hour after dawn.’

‘I know, but—’

‘Give it me, sir.’ Patty put out a work-coarsened hand. ‘Give it me and I’ll be sure to pass it on.’

Frank made a face partly of vexation, partly of wry humour as he wondered how Patty would respond should he give her a word of love and a kiss to pass on to her mistress.

‘Who’s there, Patty?’ A young voice floated down the stairwell.

‘Someone who’s just leaving,’ called back Patty.

‘It’s me!’ Frank called over Patty’s head. ‘Master Charmall!’

There was a patter of slippered footsteps and Jane Fairfayce appeared at the door, a deep shawl gathered about her.

‘Mistress!’ gasped Patty. ‘Your hair. Your nightgown.’

Jane’s long dark hair was loose from its usual arrangements, and her shawl covered a white nightgown.

‘It’s all right, Patty,’ Jane said. ‘Grandmama needs you, please go to her.’ Jane spoke firmly, and Patty could not refuse an order.

‘Don’t keep the door open, the draught will go straight up the stairs,’ Patty said, glaring at Frank as she left the couple at the door.

‘I couldn’t go without seeing you,’ said Frank, his voice just above a whisper.

‘Go? But you’ve only just arrived.’ Jane moved as close to the door as she dared without being seen on the street.

‘I’m called away. But I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

‘Please come quickly,’ Jane urged. ‘I’ve waited so long.’

‘I know, I know.’ Frank stretched out a hand to reach for her, but she drew back.

‘Someone will see us,’ she whispered. ‘You must go.’

‘I will return. And you’re not to listen to any rumours you hear of me, do you understand?’

Jane nodded, her eyes the colour of sea-soaked shingle as they filled with tears.

‘We must be brave, my darling,’ Frank whispered. He snatched up her hand and kissed it. Patty’s heavy step was heard returning down the stairs, so he stepped back into the street, watching the face at the door until she closed it at last.



‘YOU’RE LATE.’ The voice was low and rough, coming from the gloom between the trees. Frank fought down the desire to turn his horse around and ride in the opposite direction as fast as his mount would carry him, and his fae-bred horse could go fast... but not fast enough to escape *her*.

So Frank directed his horse across the river, not looking down at the icy waters that seemed perilously close through the wraith of the shadow bridge. When he gained the other side, he dismounted, leading his horse into the trees where the figure awaited him.

‘Goodness and Glory!’ Frank exclaimed.

‘Don’t use foul words,’ growled the figure, beckoning him to her.

‘Is that really you?’ Frank could not keep his astonishment from his face. ‘What happened? Are you ill?’

‘An unfortunate act of treachery,’ was the snarled reply, ‘which shall be duly repaid. Enough chit-chat, I’ve no time for it. Put me on your horse and take me home.’

‘What happened to your carriage?’

‘The carriage is at home, puddingbrain.’

‘Your crow-horse?’

‘Got his feathers singed. Not fit to fly nor ride till he’s fixed.’

‘Your broomstick, then?’

‘Met with an accident. I need to get home to make another.’

‘Home to your woodland cottage? I don’t know the way, never having —,’

There was another growl. ‘Quiet, you wantwit, I said *home*. Take me to Endscome, and quickly.’

‘No need to keep calling me names, Auntie,’ said Frank. ‘I thought you wanted me at Highbury. It’s a long ride back to Endscome.’

‘I do want you here. But not idling your time supping tea with old ladies, as my watcher tells me you’ve been doing. You’ll put some real work into it when you return. Now cease blabbermouthing and take me home. I’m too wearied to walk or talk.’

Frank went to assist his aunt onto his horse, but he hesitated before touching her. ‘Could you, you know, resume your usual look, Auntie. I’m not keen on the old wicked witch of the woods ensemble. If you don’t mind my saying so, you’re a little unkempt and there’s a terrible smell of—’

His aunt made a twisting motion of her warty fingers and Frank yelped as the band beneath his cravat tightened sharply.

‘I said *no chitchat*, now *take me home!* And go by the six-league path, I’m in a hurry.’

Frank balked at this. He detested the feeling of sickness that his aunt’s six-league path induced, and he had no charm on him to protect him from the effects. A thought flashed across his mind: if his aunt was sick and needed to get to Endscome urgently, it meant her power was waning and she needed to replenish it fast. How long would it take for her power to end altogether... what would happen if he did not do as she said...? But his aunt lifted her eyes to him from her perch on the saddle and fixed him with a knowing look that chilled him to the bones. Her fingers twitched in warning, and Frank gulped. ‘Right you are, Aunt,’ he said, ‘let’s get you home.’

‘You’ll be back soon enough, boy,’ said his aunt as he settled uneasily into his saddle. ‘There’s work to be done, and I’ve waited long enough. My patience is at an end, and the time is ripe for the plucking. Now *go!*’

A HASTY & IMPRUDENT ATTACHMENT

Rue awoke to find herself in what seemed to be an underground house. She was very comfortable, lying on a feather-stuffed mattress. The room was tidy and well-lit with firefly lanterns. The relief of not waking up inside a cage surrounded by gloom was wonderful. But when she moved her head and limbs, she felt immense pain, and looking down she could see that she had poultices bound about her. Whatever was in the poultices, they did not smell pleasant. She lifted a wrapping of fibrous leaves on her arm to peer beneath and could see red, angry welts. The witch had done her worst in her fury.

‘She’s awake,’ said a little voice, and a woodland fairy with a grandmotherly air about her appeared.

‘How do you do?’ said a second small voice that Rue recognised. ‘What an escape that was!’ He laughed, looking quite a different creature from the faded mushroom fairy she had known. He seemed brighter, more vivid, more substantial, now that he was away from the poisoned air of the witch.

‘My husband says you were so brave,’ the first fairy said, ‘how can we ever thank you?’

‘This is thanks enough,’ said Rue, trying to sit up, and feeling woozy.

‘Lie down,’ urged the fairy, ‘you are weak. It’s a wonder you survived. You must have a strong constitution.’

‘Strong as an ox,’ murmured Rue, lying down again.

‘I’ll get you more tea. Merciful mushroom tea to ease the pain and heal the poison on the inside.’ She bustled out.

‘Did everyone get out?’ was Rue’s first question.

The fairy assured her they had.

‘And what happened to *her*?’ Rue could not suppress a shudder. ‘I remember being thrown to the ground and her getting ready to strike, but I don’t remember what happened after. In fact, I thought my time had come.’

‘Your sacrifice broke her spells over us,’ said the fairy. ‘Her own house pinned her down so we could escape. She didn’t even come after us.’

‘She’s still alive then?’

He nodded.

Rue lifted her head, and her hands went to her neck. ‘It’s gone!’ she said in relief, letting her head fall back again. She gave a little lopsided grin. ‘I’ll wager she’s *fuming*. Fit to burst like an overcooked pudding!’

‘She can’t trouble us now. We’re back on the Green Lady’s lands.’

‘Where exactly am I?’

‘Silver Woods. Best place in all the worlds.’ He gave a contented sigh.

‘When can I go home?’

‘Give those wounds time to heal.’

‘I need to see the sky, and the sun, and breathe open air,’ said Rue. ‘Oh!’ she exclaimed, a memory coming back sharply. ‘And I need to warn them! She’s going after Mistress Woodhouse – she’s going into Highbury!’

‘She’s not going anywhere just now,’ said the fairy. ‘Lie down and be easy. You gave her such a blow she’ll still be reeling from it.’

‘Here we are,’ said the fairy wife, coming in with tea. ‘Isn’t it nice to have her, husband? Shall we keep her?’

‘Keep me?’ said Rue in alarm.

‘Now, now, wife, none of that,’ said the fairy. ‘You’ve got me home again. We need not be keeping anybody. I hope the trap door’s not open?’

‘The last mortal girl I had was not very companionable,’ said the fairy-wife with a sniff of disappointment. ‘Always going on about a dragon.’

Rue’s ears pricked up at this. ‘Mortal girl? With a dragon? When was this?’

The fairy shrugged. ‘Three days before the fairy ring was broken up early,’ she said. ‘Folk were most annoyed about that.’

‘It must have been Myrtle. I wonder if she got home,’ said Rue. ‘Jack!’ she suddenly cried. ‘What happened to Jack?’

‘The donkey fellow?’ said the fairy. ‘He ran home.’

‘I hope he made it back,’ worried Rue. ‘But even if he did, there would be trouble, for folks will think he’s Ben. I have to find him, and my friends,

I have to.’ She tried to get up, but a wave of weakness made her fall back down again.

‘Give the poultice and tea time to work,’ insisted the fairy wife. ‘Or you’ll get nowhere fast.’



HARRIET WAS LOOKING out for Myrtle the morning after the ball. She had slept little. There was too much to think about. She was so relieved that Myrtle was home, but equally anxious for Rue. ‘Poor Rue – a witch!’ she murmured over and over again as she paced between the entrance hall and the driveway, watching for Myrtle’s arrival.

She paused before the Green Lady’s carving on the wall opposite the door. ‘I’m sorry we did not have the usual May Day dance and feast,’ she said, thinking that the Green Lady looked solemn that morning. ‘Thank you for sending Myrtle home, but, please, will you help us get Rue back too?’

She was not certain if she were imagining things; she knew she was good at that, but she thought she saw the smallest ripple of movement upon the Green Lady’s face. A blink of the carved eyes, and a glance that bestowed something wise and comforting to Harriet in that moment.

There was the sound of footsteps outside, and Harriet flew to the open door and came face to face with – ‘Master Martin!’

‘Maid Harriet, that is, Sister Harriet,’ Master Martin stammered, blushing as deeply as Harriet did at this sudden meeting. ‘I came to see if you were well. We heard this morning about a witch coming into Highbury last night, and I know you’re alone here...’ His speech trailed away as though he suddenly realised how close they were; he took a step back. ‘Is all well?’

‘Yes,’ said Harriet breathlessly. ‘All is well. It’s kind of you to...’ her voice trailed off as well.

‘Ma says you’ve always a welcome at home, there’s no need for you to be here alone if you—’

‘You’re so kind! You are all so very kind! But then you always...’

There was a pause.

‘I was sorry not to put the Maypole up for you this month. But I knew you wouldn’t be needing it this year.’

‘No. Not this year.’

‘Hopefully next year.’

‘Hopefully.’

Another awkward silence.

‘Well then,’ said Robert Martin. ‘If there’s nothing I can help with... if all is well...’

‘Thank you. You’re so very kind.’

‘Good day, then. You will send word if you need anything? You’ll come to the farm if you need anyone?’

‘Thank you,’ was all Harriet could whisper in parting.

He turned away slowly and Harriet put a hand to her fast-beating heart as she watched him go.

THE ARRIVAL of Myrtle distracted Harriet from her flustered feelings, but Cloe-Claws was not letting the margool anywhere near the school entrance.

‘He has no fire,’ Myrtle told the hissing, spitting cat. ‘He won’t eat you, or cause any trouble. He’s not a dragon!’

But Cloe-Claws was having none of it. She swelled out her fur till she was as big as the margool. He, meanwhile, responded with red puffs, which Myrtle knew meant he was either scared or cross. He flapped his wings and bounced up and down the driveway, but did not dare move within claw distance of the silver-striped cat.

Myrtle gave up and said she would meet Harriet in the garden. ‘Please bring breakfast,’ she called in parting. ‘With fish.’

‘SO, WHAT SHALL WE DO NEXT?’ Harriet asked. She put a basket of food on the bench, and Myrtle finished an enormous yawn before picking out a buttered roll. ‘I’ve missed Busie’s cooking,’ she said. ‘Here,’ she tossed a kipper at the margool who caught it mid-air.

‘Have you had any sleep?’ Harriet asked.

‘A couple of hours. Master Knightley said to get some rest at Donwell. He said nothing had ever come over the bridge after dawn, so I snatched a nap. That’s all I have time for, I can’t lie around snoozing while Rue is in trouble.’

‘You said you had to stop a match being made,’ said Harriet. ‘Have you any clue whose match it is?’

Myrtle shook her head and swallowed. ‘Oh, this is good. Faerie fruit is all very well, but I’ve missed chewing.’ She tossed the begging margool another kipper.

‘Do you think it’s your own match?’ Harriet pressed. ‘Or mine? Or Rue’s?’

‘It’s not my match, the Green Lady said mine had been made’.

‘That is good news!’

‘I don’t think it changes things much,’ said Myrtle. ‘I can’t see us graduating after all that’s happened, even with our assignments completed.’

‘That’s true,’ said Harriet sadly. ‘It can’t be my match you’re to stop, because Master Knightley isn’t about to ask anyone to marry him. Could it be Rue’s? Perhaps Elizabeth Martin has met the wrong person while Rue is not here to watch over her. Shall I go and see her and find out if she’s met anyone?’

‘Good idea,’ said Myrtle. ‘Go today. We can’t waste any time, for Rue’s sake. Did you bring paper and pencil?’

‘I did. I brought everything you asked for.’

‘We’ll make a list of every unmarried person in Highbury.’

‘I already have a list of every family in Highbury, they’re all in alphabetical order, see. Mistress Woodhouse and I were calling on everyone, looking for clues as to the thief.’

‘Excellent,’ said Myrtle, snatching at the list and running her eyes down it. ‘This will save a lot of time.’

‘We got up to W,’ said Harriet. ‘There isn’t anyone with a name beginning with X, and there’s only the Youngs and Yarrows left to go. There’s no Z’s either. There used to be old Master Zephyr, but he died last year.’

‘What a pity you never found the thief,’ said Myrtle, frowning over the list with its pencilled crosses against each name up to ‘W’. ‘Hopefully we’ll have more luck with finding an imminent marriage proposal. Let’s get to work.’



IT TOOK Frank three days to recover from the six-league journey home. He'd always hated that mode of travel, and only the direst circumstances could induce him to make it. Having a witch for an aunt who kept you enslaved by a bond about your neck was inducement enough; he was not fond of feeling as though he were being choked to death should her ire be roused.

It was a small mercy that his aunt was too ill to bother him much. Whatever had happened to her, it had been a significant blow. She could not recover her usual glamour for almost a week, remaining in her hideous old crone state in the meantime. It was an apt look for her, but he much preferred the usual one; it was easier on the eye.

When she did recover, she spent long days shut away in her private wing, working who knew what kind of deceitful charms and dark spells. The mysteries of his aunt's workings were kept from him by bronze-bound doors between her wing of the manor and his own. Some nights he would see her ride away against the moon, on whatever grim work she was about. She had been away from Endscome for weeks recently, and it had been a welcome absence.

He spent the days pacing round the manor grounds, not seeing the beautiful gardens, only longing for the sight of one particular poky little sitting-room, with a grandmother sat by the fire smiling approvingly at him over her knitting, while the talkative old aunt nattered away, and he pretended to listen, but all the while he was watching *her*, his darling, his beloved, urging her to play something on the spinet he had sent as a secret gift to her, knowing how unbearable it was for her to be cooped up without music. How would he break free of his aunt? What would it take? What could be done? What a torment it all was!

'Frank!' His aunt's voice called from somewhere in the grounds. He thought of ignoring her and disappearing into the box maze which was at hand. But he disliked the box maze. Many a time in his childhood she had shut him up in it, hiding the way out until he repented with tears for whatever exertion of his will against hers he'd committed.

'Frank, come here. I know you're on the other side of the wall.'

There was no escaping. He ducked under the archway into the vegetable gardens. He tried not to look at his aunt's gnomes. He felt too sorry for them. They hated working for a witch, even if the gardens were vast and beautiful. It was a strange anomaly of his aunt's, this avarice for the beauty

of green things, and her hatred of the Green Man and the Green Lady who ruled over all things green. He knew of her desire to oust them and set herself up in their place. He knew of her long-harboured plan to marry him off to the daughter of the Green Man's guardian in Highbury. Such a marriage would supplant the guardian she had blighted all those years ago. It would enable her to take possession of the only legitimate door into this part of Faerie once he became the new master of Hartfield.

She had laid all these plans while he was but a small child. She had persuaded his father to give Frank up to her. Poor Father would have had the resources to withstand her arts. He knew all her torrid history of vengeance; she had gloated over her carefully laid plans, knowing that Frank could speak of them to no one, the bind about his neck forcing him to silence. His aunt's story of plotting and revenge had been the chief bedtime tale of his youth. He knew all the details – how she had arranged for a roamer to trick Master Woodhouse into buying her enchanted greens. How she had schemed to induce his father into giving him up to her. The dubious adoption papers and contracts. She had plotted it all.

He knew all the plans. But he could never willingly submit to them, especially not now his heart belonged to another, not now he had a purpose for a life apart from his aunt's will. But how to escape?

‘Pack your things. We leave in the morning.’

‘Leave for where?’

‘For Highbury, you ninny. Where else?’

‘You’re going into Highbury?’

‘Just long enough to set things up.’

‘What things?’

‘What is this, an interrogation? All you need know is I want a betrothal by Midsummer, and a marriage before the Last Apple of Donwell falls.’

Frank was silent. His aunt took that as an assent. She stood up from her vegetable patch and brushed earth from her gloved hands. She was in her Endscome glamour as a well-to-do lady, tall and richly dressed beneath her gardening apron. ‘What’s the matter with you? Why the long face? I match you up with a bride that even a well-paid Godmother could do no better at procuring. The girl’s got looks, got money, got a fool of a father you can easily get rid of, and most of all, got a door into the Green Man’s lands that ought to be put to good use. The future is rich, boy, the future is green.’

‘Perhaps I don’t want that future,’ Frank dared to say. The garden gnome looked up in alarm, sensing trouble, and slowly edged away. ‘Perhaps I want to be at liberty to choose my own future. My own bride. Perhaps I don’t want to see other people deceived and tricked and got rid of.’

His aunt laughed, which was not a pleasant sound. ‘Perhaps you don’t know what’s good for you, you foolish, lily-livered, puddle-brained bottom-wart. We leave at dawn. If you’re not ready, we’ll have to take the six-league path to make up for lost time.’

A WOULD-BE LOVER

‘**Y**ou’re not coming with me, are you?’ Frank was alarmed. He had expected his aunt to part ways with him at the thorn trees, leaving him to travel the rest of the way to the bridge. They were both mounted on black horses. Hers had a grey muzzle and black feathers for a mane.

‘Thought I might see how things lie over the border,’ she replied. ‘Have a bit of fun while I’m about it. You like a bit of fun and games, don’t you, boy?’

Frank pulled a face at the thought of *her* idea of fun.

They reached the end of the path, and the shadow of the bridge was glimpsed through the trees. She dismounted from her horse, muttered a spell that made Frank shudder to hear it, and her horse shrank down and burst into black feathers and a sharp grey beak. ‘Spy out the riverbank,’ she ordered the bird. ‘Make sure that knightly nuisance isn’t out with his sword. And see where the long-haired ninny is.’

The bird screeched and flew away, like a swift moving storm cloud wheeling across the early summer landscape.

It seemed like a painfully long time to Frank before the bird returned, but it always felt too long when he was alone with his aunt. Even in Faerie, where time took on a different feel and nothing generally felt too short or too long, it felt too long to be in her presence.

The bird returned, deliberately grazing the top of Frank’s head to make him duck, before landing on a low branch and squawking its message in rough sounds that made no sense to Frank. His aunt growled in displeasure at what she heard ‘The ninny is in the tower,’ she said.

‘Mistress Woodhouse is in the tower?’ said Frank. ‘Then I’ll not be able to get near her.’ He felt a flicker of hope.

His aunt’s brow grew darker and her eyes blacker as she churned over ideas. ‘We can use this to our advantage,’ she said, her words slow and thick, like oozing marsh mud. ‘We can have some real fun and games now.’

Frank exerted himself to keep from showing his dismay. His aunt began another spell, and he turned his head away to avoid the eye-watering sensation that took place when she transformed. After a few lines of that dark, creeping language and the subsequent flash, gone was her tall, imposing figure with its fine riding habit and hat, and in her place stood an old peddler woman with a little basket on her arm, her face as lined and brown as a raisin.

‘You know, Aunt, if you’re going to go among the people of Highbury, you’d find they would take to you more if you looked better. A bit younger. Cleaner. Less of the fortune-telling, curse-casting gypsy and more of the harmless country maiden, perhaps?’

‘If I want to charm information out of lubberworts, I’ll do the pretty act, but a bit of fear is what I want this day. Don’t question my methods, boy. Worry about what you’re here to do. Remember, I want a betrothal by Midsummer and a wedding before the Last Apple.’

‘What’s so important about the Last Apple? Why must I be married by then?’

‘Because I foresee last year’s Apple is in the way. I should have kept track of where it went. A little oversight of mine.’

Frank still did not understand what was meant by this, but he was not inclined to spend any longer than was necessary in his aunt’s company.

‘I’ll be off then,’ he said, lifting his reins. ‘Though you haven’t said how you expect me to woo Mistress Woodhouse when she’s protected in the Green Man’s tower?’

‘You’ll find a way to make yourself agreeable. They have gnomes, don’t they? Find a gnomish ladder.’

‘Climb all the way up!’ Frank was appalled. ‘You know how I feel about heights, Aunt!’

‘Heights, snakes, spiders, being lost in a maze, locked in a cellar, not to mention cold baths. What is there you’re not afraid of, you lily-livered puppy?’

‘I don’t mind spiders,’ said Frank, a little hurt. ‘Just not those big ones with teeth that chase me. And I’m not scared of cold baths, I just found them very unpleasant. I believe most children would.’

‘You’ve no sense of humour. Get up there and charm your bride-to-be, and be outside the tower tomorrow at moonrise with a bow and arrow to hand.’

‘Bow and arrow?’

‘Stop parroting, you lummo. A bow and arrow. Archery is still in fashion, is it not?’

‘My father does not shoot,’ said Frank. ‘He’s not one for sports.’

‘Just get yourself a bow and arrow and be waiting with it.’

‘And what am I to do with my bow and arrow?’

‘Act the hero.’ His aunt cackled. ‘Croker will keep you informed of the plans.’

Frank cast a mistrustful eye at Croker, who cawed loudly at hearing his name.

‘And what are you going to do?’ Frank asked.

‘Never you mind. Off with you. Have you got all your charms about you? Good. Get gone. And don’t let me down.’

Frank urged on his mount, and the near-invisible bridge was gained. He crossed it with a surge of conflicting feelings: eagerness to see his true love again, and dread at what his aunt was plotting against this unsuspecting village that had welcomed him as a long-lost son. If only there was a way to escape her influence and cut off her schemes. He had to find a way.



‘MISTRESS WOODHOUSE!’ The call drew Emma to her window. Looking out she could see a young man below, waving his hat.

‘Master Charmall! Are you come back so soon? How do you do?’

‘Famously! But what of you? What horrible luck to be shut up in this way! Is there ought I can do?’

‘Can you vanquish the witch who may or may not be prowling about?’ called down Emma, ‘then I might leave this tower and be done with it.’

‘I shall come up!’ he called.

‘You cannot. The door will not open until Papa awakens and speaks the word of release.’

‘If the door cannot be opened, then I must come up by other means.’

‘By what means?’

But Frank had disappeared from view. Emma leaned out of the window and watched below, full of curiosity. Presently he returned, carrying a ladder. He took off his hat and outer jacket, set the enchanted ladder against the wall and began to climb.

‘What are you doing?’ Emma called down in amazement, watching Frank Charmall’s bare head coming closer and closer to her window. ‘It is so very far up!’ she cried, alarmed at the danger he was putting himself in, but he kept steadily climbing, though he looked rather grim, and did not glance down once.

Up and up, and then he was swinging one leg over the sill and then the other, and there he was, both feet on the floor, pulling out a large handkerchief from a pocket to mop his brow, all the while laughing heartily at his own daring, though she thought him a shade or two paler than he usually was.

‘What a wonder those gnomish ladders are!’ he cried. ‘They will go any height.’

Emma hardly knew what to do, or say, it was all most unexpected – and most inappropriate. They were alone. Completely. In a locked tower. On first seeing him from the window she had been flooded with happiness and thought all the old feelings of romance were returned. But now that he was here, in her tower, he seemed rather ordinary, despite his extraordinary antic.

‘I shall not stay above a minute, Mistress Woodhouse,’ he assured her, still grinning at the pleasure, or the relief, of his success in reaching her. ‘I would not compromise you for the world, but neither would I see you shut up like this without some attempt to cheer you with a friendly visit.’

Emma laughed back at him, relieved by his jovial manner, which held no dangerous sentiments of a lover.

He pulled out something from inside his shirt. ‘There,’ he said, ‘a letter from Mistress Weston, though she did not think I should get it to you by such means.’

‘I am sure she did not,’ said Emma, taking the letter, pleased with its fatness. ‘Mistress Weston’s letters have been like nectar to my soul during

this trial,' she said, clutching it to herself as something precious.

'I understand.' Frank looked solemn for a moment. 'A letter from one who loves you while you struggle in captivity is priceless. If I could speak of—' Then he stopped with a wince, tugging at his cravat as though it were too tight.

Emma did not know what to make of such contrary behaviour. One minute joking, the next serious. He seemed rather capricious. 'Do you need a drink of water,' she offered, gesturing to a jug on a table.

He shook himself, then grinned, pushing his thick, light brown hair back from his flushed face. 'Did you not think it a good joke, my climbing up?'

'No, indeed! Far too dangerous to be a joke! What if you should fall and break your head? What would your father and Mistress Weston do then?'

'Oh, what is life without a few adventures to cheer oneself up with? We ought always to take hold of pleasure with both hands while we can! But I shall be off directly.' He swung his leg back over the sill. 'I hope your confinement is extremely short. What an absolute bore to be shut up, and in such fine weather, too.' He swung his other leg over and stood on the top rung, leaning his arms on the sill for a moment. 'My father says every man in the village has been out scouring every field and barn and copse, and there is no sign of any witch about, so I am in good hopes you will be restored to us soon.'

'I hope so,' Emma said longingly. 'If only my father could be roused from the stupor he has fallen into, and be reassured that all was well, he would release me.'

'You could climb on my back and I'll carry you down, and we'll run away and have a picnic under some shady tree! If you object to my carrying you like a donkey, you could unwind your hair and use it as a rope to climb down by.'

She scolded him for his nonsense. He grinned, and then he happened to glance down and all his jollity drained away and his face grew pale.

'Are you sure you don't need a drink of water,' Emma said. 'You seem anxious. It cannot be due to a fear of heights, for you would not be dangling one hundred feet in the air if you were.'

'One hundred feet?' said Frank faintly. 'How far that sounds.' He gulped, then summoned up a crooked smile. 'Good thing I have my protection charms about me. Farewell for now, fair lady of the tower. Sing

me a sweet song to send me safely on my way. Are you quite sure I cannot carry you off?’

‘To be sure you cannot. I shall not attempt to climb down from such a terrible height, though I am sorely tempted. If my circumstance does not end soon, I may well call for you to bring me a ladder, though I don’t know if the protective magic in these stones will let me escape.’

His head disappeared from view, but then it popped up again, startling her. ‘Would you have such a thing as a bow and arrows, Mistress Woodhouse?’

‘Bow and arrows? I do not. Are you going hunting?’

‘No. But I thought carrying a weapon a good idea in the circumstances. All these reports of goblin hordes and witches... I am not trained in fencing, so a sword is of no use, I thought a bow might suffice.’ He smiled charmingly.

‘I’m sorry I cannot oblige you. You could try Tom Fletcher in the village.’

‘Ah. The fletcher. I shall call directly. Farewell for now, fair damsel.’

He disappeared a second time from the sill and she moved to the window to watch in a mix of amusement and concern as he clambered neatly and briskly down the ladder. After each rung was descended, it shrank down, so when he reached the bottom only a small ladder remained to be carried off. Emma heaved a sigh of relief to see him safely on the ground. He picked up his hat and waved it up at her. She could hear his laughter floating through the summer air as he carried the ladder back to the garden storehouse. There seemed a good deal of relief in the laugh.

‘Dear me,’ she said to herself. ‘What would Master Knightley make of such an escapade?’

MASTER KNIGHTLEY HAD no thought of what folly and frivolity Frank Charmall might be up to. He was too busy searching the countryside around the village, for he had heard a rumour of a tall young man with curly hair being sighted recently. The description was very like that of Benjamin Larkins.

He walked his horse through Gypsy Woods, so called because gypsies often made camp there in the summer on their circuit through the country. He saw no gypsy camp, but as he rested briefly in a grassy clearing, letting

his horse graze for a while, he thought he saw a figure ahead of him among the trees. It was too tall for a troll, and too broad for an old witch. He moved after the figure, taking care in case the person posed a danger. He glimpsed a curly head, and a workman's tunic that looked blackened and almost burnt through on the back. There was something familiar about him. Could it be... 'Benjamin! Is that you? Ben! Ben Larkins!'

The figure stopped, seemed to be listening. Master Knightley hurried forwards, pushing low-hanging branches out of his way. It *was* Ben. He was certain it was. And yet... what was the matter with him? He looked so odd.

'Ben?' he called again. The young man turned his head towards him, then dropped on all fours, brayed and bellowed like a donkey, and took off.

Master Knightley ran as fast as he could, but he could not keep pace, and he could not abandon his horse. He ran until there was no sight nor sound of anyone around him. The odd figure, who may or may not have been Benjamin Larkins, was gone.

THE TENDEREST SPIRIT OF GALLANTRY

Harriet's world was swirling with confusion and worries like a snowstorm at gloaming time, when nothing clear can be seen, but all kinds of fantastical shapes imagined.

She dreaded the disappointment Mother Goodword would feel when she returned. Suddenly she felt very weary of the whole Godmothering business. She was a failure. These were some of her thoughts as she trudged towards Mill Farm to try to discern if Elizabeth Martin had met any young man who was on the brink of proposing marriage. It was highly unlikely, but she had said she would go, and so she would.

She was glad that this was not the first visit she had made since her refusal of Robert Martin. The last visit had been awkward, and yet there had been some pleasure in it also. Despite everything that had happened, she would always think of the Martins with gratitude and warmth. She tried very hard not to think about whether Robert would be at the house when she called. It was more likely that he was about his business on the farm. It would be nice to see Elizabeth again. Perhaps she could teach her to milk cows when Harriet lost her place at the school? Working in a milking parlour was a far better prospect than catching eels...

Harriet did spy Master Martin as she walked up the lane to the farmhouse. He was driving a flock of sheep into a meadow. She waved shyly to him over the hedgerow, but he did not see her, and he was too far for her to call out to him, even if her voice had not been too quivery to manage it. It was very strange, this quivery-ness she always felt when she saw him. Whatever did it mean?

Young May Martin opened the door. 'Harriet! You came. Robert said he told you to call.' She opened the door wider. 'Eliza's in the kitchen. Any word of Rue?'

'Sadly not.' Harriet wiped her shoes carefully on the doormat; Mistress Martin was very particular about dust and dirt belonging in the farmyard and fields and not in her farmhouse. 'Can I ask you something in confidence,' Harriet whispered, before May shut the door. 'Have there been any gentlemen callers here of late?'

May pulled a face. 'Why would we get gentlemen callers? The last time a man called here was the one Rue brought with her.'

'The man with the donkey,' said Harriet, remembering Elizabeth's frantic retelling of a man and a donkey and poor Ben Larkins. 'What happened to him?'

'Ask Eliza. I'm not allowed to talk about any of it.'

'Talk about what?' said Elizabeth's voice. 'Oh, Harriet, this is a pleasant surprise.'

Harriet stepped into the large, airy kitchen where Elizabeth was at the table picking over a bowl of lentils.

'Morning, Elizabeth,' she greeted. 'I was just recalling that you never said what happened to the man with the donkey on the morning Rue disappeared. Did he go home again? He must have been very shocked.'

Elizabeth gave an odd, startled look and glanced at the stool beside her, but did not reply.

'Sit down and have a cup of spiced apple,' May said, moving to put a kettle on the brick oven. 'Lizzy has lost her manners since Rue and *he* came.'

'Since who came? The man with the donkey?' Harriet's suspicions were roused. There was something odd about this donkey-man, whoever he was. Could he and Elizabeth be the match she was searching for? Could finding the match that must be stopped be this easy?

May put a cup of hot apple juice before her, and Harriet was startled from her thoughts by seeing Elizabeth pour a few drops of her own juice into a little dish, blowing on it to cool it first, before saying, 'take care, it's very warm,' before she put it in front of a large yellow and green *frog*.

'A new pet?' Harriet asked incredulously. A pet frog who liked to drink cider?

Elizabeth grimaced. 'Not exactly.'

The frog made a soft croak and Harriet, whose animal-hearing had improved remarkably as she grew to understand Cloe-Claw's language, sat bolt upright and blinked in surprise. 'It talks!'

'Does it?' said Elizabeth and May together.

'Did you not hear?' Harriet moved closer to the table where the frog was perched. It croaked again.

'What did he say?' May asked.

'It said,' said Harriet in amazement, 'that the cider is excellent!'

'Go on, tell her all about him,' said May. 'She ought to know, being a Godmother and all.'

'I suppose so,' said Elizabeth, 'though it's in the strictest confidence. Rue promised she'd be back before Ben was missed, and she's been gone months.'

'Ben?' Harriet looked at the frog who was using a long tongue to lick up more cider.

'He's not Ben,' said Elizabeth, as though that were not much comfort. She began to relate the whole sorry saga.



'I MUST GO,' Frank said, his reluctance evident.

'So soon? You've only just got here,' said Dame Baytes.

'Do stay and take another cup, Master Charmall,' begged Mistress Baytes. 'Take a baked apple, or a slice of cake, a glass of wine? I think we have a little wine in the pantry, I shall go and see.'

'You are very kind,' Frank said, standing up and reaching for his hat. 'But, truly, I must go. I am expected.'

'I'll see you to the door,' Jane said politely.

When the young couple had passed the bend on the steps, Frank turned round and clasped hold of Jane.

'Frank!' she gasped. 'My aunt will hear us.'

'Just one kiss, my love, it is like bread and meat to a starving man!' The kiss was given, but swiftly and with some anxiety lest Patty should look round the stairwell.

'Such a short visit,' sighed Jane as he stepped out of the door.

'And never alone,' sighed Frank.

‘How much longer?’ whispered Jane.

‘Soon, my love. It must be soon, or my heart will burst.’

‘As will mine.’

The lovers parted with a lingering look, and Frank betook himself to the fletcher’s workshop with due haste. Wretched aunt! – even here in Highbury she controlled the movements of his day. He could barely snatch ten precious minutes to see Jane before he must be off, sourcing a bow and arrows, of all things, and now there was this new instruction ordering him to be on the corner of the Donwell Road at precisely ten o’clock in the morning, and to be sure he had a stout stick to hand. What pernicious scheme was this regarding?

The fletcher assured him that a bow and quiver full of arrows would reach Randalls by dinnertime, and Frank hurried on, hastening to the outskirts of the woodland known to the locals as Gypsy Wood, that he might obtain a stout stick. As he looked about, searching for a suitable stick, someone tore past him, knocking his shoulder as he went.

‘Hey, there!’ called Frank, ‘Have a little care, man!’ For it was a young man who had run as though the Wild Hunt were on his heels. Frank was not unduly alarmed by the man’s strange appearance, for he had grown up in Faerie. The youth was tall and lanky with a mop of curls, and looked as though his clothes were singed and tattered, though it was hard to see clearly, for he streaked past so quickly.

‘What’s the hurry!’ Frank called after him. The youth did not stop, but he made a sound that sounded like that of a donkey’s bray. Frank soon forgot him, and continued his search, finding a fallen branch of an ash tree that could be reputably described as ‘stout’.

Putting the stick over his shoulder he made his way back to the road, wondering grimly what ‘fun and games’ of his aunt’s this was all pertaining to.



HARRIET LEFT THE FARMHOUSE, allowed the fierce little cockerel to chase her up the path and wandered down the lane, peering over the hedgerows as she went, telling herself that she was not really looking to see if Robert Martin was there, but was only admiring the summery view.

There was certainly no prospect of Elizabeth Martin being on the verge of an engagement, not unless the poor frog were to turn into a handsome prince and sweep her off her feet. Perhaps she ought to have asked what kind of looks poor Master Smith used to have, but it was irrelevant to the task in hand. Perhaps Myrtle had made better progress as she made her investigations about the village with her dragon-thing wrapped up in the forgetfulness cloak.

She walked across the field to the end of Donwell Road, feeling a jumble of thoughts about the Martins and poor Rue, and wondering that she had not been sent for by Mistress Woodhouse that day, but concluding that Mistress Woodhouse was no doubt very tired after the late night of dancing at the ball. Harriet made a yawn herself, and wondered if she should have a quick nap before going to assist Myrtle, but shook her head at herself. There was no time for naps.

Images of Master Martin standing on the doorstep early that morning would keep obtruding on her thoughts as she walked along. That patch of meadowsweet reminded her of the snowy whiteness of the clean linen smock he had been wearing... that cloud directly ahead looked uncannily like the shape of Robert Martin's profile when he smiled... that quivering ash tree reminded her of the staff of ash wood she had watched him shape and smooth in the evenings, to fashion for a herding staff... but why was the ash tree quivering where there was no wind to speak of?

Harriet paused in the grassy track, looking at the tree and the bushes about its trunk, which were certainly quivering as though a gaggle of small creatures were hiding.

'Well, good morning to you, dearie,' said a voice from behind Harriet, that made her give a little squeak of surprise.

'Oh, my!' said Harriet, whirling round. 'You startled me!'

It was an old woman with a face as brown and wrinkled as a raisin. She had a little basket on her arm. Harriet could not recall seeing her before; she must be a peddler passing through. She glanced down at the basket, wondering what she would be persuaded to buy. She hoped she was not a roamer; Mother Goodword always said they must never buy anything from a roamer, for it was certainly stolen goods at the least, and cursed goods at the worst.

'I don't wish to buy anything, good mother,' said Harriet, 'I have no need of anything. But I'll gladly give you a penny. I may even have two on

me.' Harriet rummaged for her pocket inside her gown.

The old woman snatched hold of Harriet's hand and pulled it to her wizened face. Harriet gave a little 'Oh!' of surprise, both at the suddenness of the movement, and at the strength of such a little old woman. She could not pull her hand away at all.

'What interesting lines,' murmured the old lady.

'Oh, if you please, I would rather not have my fortune told,' said Harriet anxiously, recalling Mother Goodword's warnings to be very careful who told you the future. It could harbour a curse if it came from a darkling spirit.

'Two lines, but which one shall prevail?' said the old woman, tracing Harriet's palm.

'Please, take the pennies with my good will,' stammered Harriet. All her senses were now telling her that this was not a harmless old lady. The smell of something burnt and rotten was invading her nostrils. Smell was her most acute sense.

'You will fail to choose either,' rasped the woman.

'I don't want to hear it!' cried Harriet. 'Let me go!'

'You will drift into uselessness, like a morning mist.'

'I'm not listening!'

'You know not who you are nor where you are going.'

'*There was a fair maid and her heart was true!*' Harriet burst into loud song. She could not pull free from this horrible darkling woman, and she could not cover her ears to keep from listening to what might be a curse, so she sang at the top of her voice, sounding shrill and tuneless in her anxiety.

'*She looked to the sky, and she saw it was blue...*'

'You may as well give up all your little girlish hopes and dreams...'

'*She looked to the woods, and she saw they were shady...*'

'All you're good for is pulling up eels!'

'*For they were the woods of the fairest Green Lady!*'

'*Arrghh!*' cried the old woman, releasing Harriet's hand. Harriet covered her ears and ran.

'*Roll her over!*' called the woman, and out of the quivering bushes burst three small woodland goblins who ran at Harriet and began tugging on her gown and pinching her legs, while she shrieked in terror.

'Get back!' bellowed a manly voice, and there was the thump of running steps across the grass, and a whistle of a stick whooshing down at the

goblins, and Harriet, her hands still pressed to her ears lost herself in shrieking and terror and swooned into the arms of her rescuer.

‘Oh, Master Charmall!’ she murmured as he caught her up under her shoulders.

‘Never fear!’ cried that brave young man. ‘They have run away, the cowardly fiends!’

‘And the old woman?’ gasped Harriet. ‘Is she gone?’

‘I see no old woman,’ said Frank, lifting his head and scanning round the grassy knell.

‘She was so dreadful,’ cried Harriet. ‘She said such horrible things!’

‘She is gone,’ Master Charmall assured her. ‘Shall I assist you to the school? But you are quite alone there, that will not do. I will take you to Hartfield. Put your hand about my neck, I have you. Never fear, you shall be well.’

Harriet was so overcome with the fright of it all that she was only dimly aware of the people rushing up in the street, when they passed up the Broadway.

‘She is well,’ Frank Charmall announced to all who enquired. ‘She was assaulted by a few goblins, and a strange woman, but I have seen them off.’

The word ran through the village faster than a royal courier could ride – Sister Harriet had been attacked by a great horde of goblins and a wicked witch, and Master Frank Charmall had single-handedly fought them off and rescued her from being carried away to a terrible fate!

TOO MUCH CONFINED

Emma had taken her tray of breakfast and heard the news from her maid through the little hatch in the tower door. Her father was still in his bed, unable to be roused enough to be made to say the words of release.

She heard of Master Knightley's fresh attempt that morning to rouse her father. The maid said he had come in with his sword on his thigh like a brave knight, having watched the darkling bridge until dawn, but the master would only repeat that the witch was coming and Mistress Woodhouse must be kept safe.

'Is there anything I can fetch you, Mistress?' Emma's maid asked when Emma had finished her close questioning,

'That will be all,' Emma said, keeping her voice at its usual tone. She would reveal no loss of command over herself before the servants.

She took up the spyglass on the windowsill; watching the goings-on in Highbury was the only form of entertainment to while away the long, slow hours. Nothing of interest was happening in Highbury that morning. There was a line of black smoke still rising from out of the Wild Woods, but that had been there for some time now. Whatever had burned down in the depths of the woods, it must have been of darkling origin to burn so long and create that horrible little black cloud in the otherwise summer-blue sky.

She thought she saw a figure very like Harriet's walking up to the corner of Donwell Road, then taking the footpath across the grassy meadow in the direction of Mill Farm. She hoped it was not Harriet. It was difficult to tell, for the summer foliage of the trees and hedgerows screened the figure. She had already seen a young man come tearing out of Gypsy Woods as though a wild boar were chasing him. She could not see him

either, for there were too many trees in the way; that he was tall and wild looking was all she could say of him.

She had put her spyglass down when the maid brought her breakfast, so she saw nothing of the drama unfolding in the meadow between Harriet and an old woman and three goblins, closely followed by Frank Charmall, who very usefully happened to have in his possession a stout enough stick to see off the attackers. She saw nothing of him bearing a faint Harriet along, down the Broadway, with a gaggle of onlookers following behind.

She did hear the creak of the great iron sweep gate opening, and she moved back to the tower window to see two persons entering, two persons whom she had not expected to see together – it was Frank Charmall and Harriet! – Harriet leaning heavily upon his arm and looking absolutely white-faced!

‘Harriet!’ Emma called from the window. ‘Master Charmall! Whatever has happened!’

The figures disappeared into the manor entrance, and Emma could only pace up and down between the door, listening for footsteps, then back to the window, peering out, half in hopes that Frank Charmall would appear atop a ladder again that she might be relieved of such suspense!

At last she heard quick footsteps on the stone stairs, and her young maid’s voice, breathless from a hurried climb, reached her through the little hinged opening on the door.

‘Master Charmall said to come to you direct, ma’am, for you would be fair worried!’

‘Bless him!’ said Emma. ‘Is Maid Smith ill?’

‘She were accosted. By goblins. And an old woman. Maid Smith said it were a witch, for she were too strong to be a regular old woman.’

‘Goblins! A witch! Is she harmed?’

‘She’s had salts and wine and is awake and talking. She’s not harmed, just taken affright. Master Charmall, he saved her. He fought off them goblins and carried her here. Such a hero!’

‘Poor Harriet,’ Emma said with feeling. ‘What a mercy he was passing at that exact moment!’

The maid was sent away to garner any fresh news, and Emma sat and wondered over such a strange happening. Could it really be that the witch had come into Highbury at last? But if it were, why was she wandering

about the fields frightening lone maidens? That was most unpleasant, but not terribly dangerous, not if one man could easily send her packing.

‘It must have been but a gypsy trying to get money from anyone passing by,’ Emma concluded, not wishing to believe that her danger was real. She only wanted to be free from this tower. Having stories of hordes of goblins and witches prowling the countryside would only secure her captivity if one word of it reached her father. Oh, that Frank Charmall had truly defeated the witch – he would be a hero indeed. She could almost be persuaded to marry such a hero, so great would her gratitude be!

EMMA WISHED Frank Charmall had not put ideas of escape into her mind, for they were very compelling, and now that poor Harriet had been attacked, Emma longed doubly to be released that she might go to her and support her spirits.

During these dull days of confinement Mistress Weston sent a good many notes to lighten Emma’s solitude, and when her father regained a period of lucidity, he would add a shaky note to her meal trays, assuring her of his continual terror, and his relief that she at least was safe. But now was the second week of her confinement, and still there was no certain news, only speculation and hopes and fears.

Mistress Weston’s last missive had not pleased Emma in full, for in it there were some very disagreeable lines regarding Master Knightley not being able to take his eyes from Jane Fairfayce when he happened to meet her at Randalls; and whenever Frank spoke to Jane and engaged her attention, Master Knightley actually glared at poor Frank, quite as though he were jealous.

This all confirmed Mistress Weston’s ridiculous idea of Master Knightley being in love with Jane, but Emma could not endure it. What nonsense! Master Knightley and Jane Fairfayce – what a notion! And Emma scribbled these opinions in her reply with such vigour that she broke her nib.

On finishing her letter, she got up and paced the turret room, back and forth, standing before the window for a minute or two to feel the cooling air of early evening upon her skin, for it had been a sultry day, far hotter than even June had any right to be.

‘Oh, wretched captivity, what shall I do?’ she cried once again. Her eye fell upon the *Godmother’s Book of Proverbial Wisdom*, strange how that book seemed to appear in whatever quarter of the house she should be in, and though she disliked the book, yet she was drawn to it.

Hasty climbers have hasty falls.

‘And what, pray, does that mean?’ she asked the book. ‘Tell me something useful. Something helpful. I need counsel and there is none to give it. How can my father be brought to his senses? Is there any danger in me being at liberty, or is it necessary for me to remain here? Oh, that is three questions. Even you cannot answer three questions in one proverb.’

Beware the fury of a patient grudge.

‘That answers none of my questions.’

She stared in vexation at the page, then turned it over, scanning the lines until she found one that was illuminated.

A handful of patience is worth two handfuls of gold.

‘Now you are talking plainly. I can understand that saying. But does it mean that I must be patient and wait here?’

Do not fall before you are pushed.

‘No one is pushing me.’

Do not sacrifice tomorrow for today.

‘Now we are back to nonsense.’

The wise see more from the bottom of the well than the fool sees from the highest tower.

‘Now you are casting insults.’ Emma’s irritation rose.

Keep asking the question until it becomes the answer.

‘Why, you ought to be renamed the book of Vexatious Riddles, not the book of Wise Proverbs.’ She slammed the book shut.

She moved back to the window to cool herself, feeling peevish with everything at that moment. In a rebellious impulse she pulled a stool to the window, climbed up and sat upon the deep window frame, her back against the casing, looking up at the stars and moon. The stars were very pretty from so high up.

She unpinned her long plaits, liking the feel of the cool air on her hot scalp. Her hair was growing at a rapid rate; ever since the mischief in Highbury began, her hair began to be mischievous also, tendrilling about her face like an unruly sweet pea plant, and growing as much as seven inches in a week. On hot days, such as today, she often had an impulse to

cut it far shorter than she had ever dared before, but she knew her father would be distressed if she did. He'd always had a strange insistence that her hair must never be cut short, as though he feared that some magical happening would be unleashed if it were. Her weekly trims by her maid had been surreptitious ones, unknown to her father.

'If I'm to be up here where none can see me, it would not signify if I had long braids or not,' she mused to herself, watching her hair tumble over the sill and out into the night, resting against the stone walls. She thought she heard something. Someone calling up to her. She leaned out.

'Ouch! What was—?'

Something had taken hold of her hair. Her whole head was yanked forwards, and her arms flew out to grasp hold of the casement walls to keep herself from toppling. Amidst this struggle, and the horrible sensation on her head, she looked down, but could see nothing in the duskiness below, and yet – yes, there was a shadow – a figure, just seen against the stones of the tower wall.

'Frank, is that you?' she gasped out, realising as she said the words that it was a ridiculous assumption to make – what would Frank Charmall be doing catching hold of her hair?

The tugging grew stronger, and she could now smell something dreadful – an acrid, smoky, burning smell that caught her breath away and turned her stomach. There was one great final yank upon her, and she was dragged over the sill and was falling – actually falling, down and down, her arms flailing for something to hold on to, but there was only the empty night air. She was falling and she would die, and it would not be an elegant death, her body would not be fit to be seen, and Papa would die of grief and Master Knightley would scold her for sitting on the windowsill and risking her life, except he would never scold her or talk to her or dance with her ever again...

BRAVADO

Everything went to plan. The new broomstick was green, and not as quick at taking directions as it ought, but she would not waste another day training it. The recent blows to her person, her work cottage, and her precious black garden had fuelled her impatience. She had waited twenty years for this. That coxcomb boy had better not let her down. She had trained him for this moment, and if it came a few months earlier than expected, if the Woodhouse ninny were not of age for a few months more, well, what were a matter of weeks? Sometimes the harvesting came early.

Dusk fell, giving her some shadow. The trees were in full leaf, and she skulked behind them, throwing a little glamour over herself to make her blend in to the shadows and stirring leaves. The tree sprites trembled and fled at her approach, the owls ducked back into their haunts, but she was too busy watching the grounds of Hartfield to pay them any attention, else she might have enjoyed a bit of sport. Nothing squealed so loud as a frightened beech sprite.

There he was. Mincing his way up the drive with a bow and quiver on his back. She'd wait until he was nearly at the tower. She heard him call up. There was the ninny, at the window, with that enchanted hair of hers falling down in a braid over the sill.

She launched off from the branches, swooped into the sky, cursing at her broom as it failed to veer at the precise moment it ought. She gave it a good kick and yanked it straight. Up she went, closer to the tower. She would not touch it; the protective green magic would be as fiery iron to her skin. The ninny was leaning out – she dived, then sheared to the left – grabbed hold of that rope-like braid, and tugged hard.

Down came the ninny with a shriek. She caught her on the broom, its enchantment holding her fast. The boy was making plenty of noise, drawing servants out to see what the fuss was. But get on with the shooting, boy!

Now he took aim. One arrow flew closer than she liked, the numskull! She flew to the roof of the hall, released the ninny onto the broad ridge. The stupid broom didn't turn away in time, and her leg grazed the roof of the hall – she shrieked as a burning sensation engulfed her leg. An arrow skimmed past her nose – the great lummo! Far too close! She hovered, waiting for the next arrow, but his next one fell short by a yard, so she edged closer, she had to make it look as though she were out of control, as though she'd been struck. Her leg was burning like a wood stove and she *was* struggling to keep control. When the next arrow arced upwards, she drew it to her by a release of magic, gave an unearthly shriek of '*You hit me! You hit me!*' and veered her stick away, shrieking as she went, taking care to make a steep downward dive into the trees over the border, before sending up a grand finale of smoke and stars and noise effects to suggest a dying witch.

'That ought to do it,' she muttered, then groaned as the burning pain in her leg flared up. She was not as resilient as she had been before that plaguesore of a Godmother-girl had caused so much damage. And here was a fresh blow, this damage to her leg from green magic. She rummaged in the pocket of her gown for a dried deathcap to help with the pain. She growled at finding only a fragment of deathcap. Her supply was low; her precious stock had been decimated in the fire.

She chewed vigorously, wincing at the bitterness of the taste and the sting of the black juice dribbling out of one corner of her mouth. Everything tasted more bitter these days. Why was that? Here she was, on the cusp of realising her long-held desire, and she couldn't even taste the pleasure of revenge. It all felt a little stale and wearisome of late. What was the matter with her? The feeling would pass. 'On to the next part of the plan,' she muttered and limped away.



MASTER KNIGHTLEY WATCHED the bridge at sunset, as he always did. Sister Myrtle took up her position within sight of the river. He'd grown

used to her presence and gave up trying to persuade her away. He had to admire her tenacity in watching for her colleague. As usual, there was no sign of the missing Godmother student, but they both noticed the large crow watching them from farther down the bank.

‘Do you think it’s fae?’ Master Knightley wondered.

‘It’s too far away for me to sense it properly,’ said Sister Myrtle, narrowing her blue eyes to try to distinguish a fae aura round the bird. ‘It’s not the first time I’ve seen it about. I’ve seen it flying near the Randalls road a couple of times.’

‘Interesting,’ murmured Master Knightley. ‘I’m surprised to see you here tonight,’ he said. ‘I thought you’d be bolstering the spirits of your fellow Sister after her misadventure this morning.’

‘I saw Harriet earlier. She said she would have an early night. I can’t do much from outside the school.’

‘The fierce old cat still won’t let you in?’

‘No,’ said Myrtle curtly. ‘And I’m very grateful to you for allowing me to rest at Donwell.’

‘I hope my housekeeper hasn’t been scolding too much over your little friend.’ He nodded in the direction of the margool, who was taking his usual soak in the river. ‘Fond of water, isn’t it?’

‘Very. I put an invisibility cloak over him when I go into Donwell, so the housekeeper can’t see him.’

‘Very wise. Who would have thought it? A dragon in the house of the dragon-slaying Knightleys?’ Myrtle opened her mouth to protest against the title of dragon, but he forestalled her. ‘I know, he’s not a fire-breather. Have you found anything in my library yet with regards to the definition of a margool?’

‘No, but I think margool may be a fae name. It might be something else in our language. Your library is excellent, by the way. Far better than the school library for general knowledge and history.’

‘My ancestors were keen historians. It’s good to see someone appreciate it. I like to study history, but I prefer to be out on the estate.’

‘I’ve been reading about the history of the Green Lands,’ said Myrtle. ‘How the Green Man and the Green Lady were awarded them by the Faerie Queen, and how the ancient family of the Wodes came to marry into the Green Man’s lineage and take on the guardianship of the Wild Woods.’

‘The connection is not so strong as it was in the past,’ said Master Knightley ‘The kingdom of Albion was as one, with no border between Faerie and England.’

‘It’s still strong enough for the Great Hall and tower to be protected by the Green Man’s magic,’ noted Myrtle, ‘and he still shows himself at Midsummer.’

‘And what will he have to say this Midsummer?’ said Master Knightley grimly. ‘The border breached, the Wild Man failing to take up his staff and order it closed. A young person missing in Faerie, perhaps two, if that’s where Ben Larkins has gone. A magic-thief still among us and not brought to account, bands of imps and goblins, and talk of the witch of the woods being sighted. I heard that it was she who accosted your colleague this morning.’

Myrtle looked as grim as he did. ‘I wondered that myself. But if the witch were in Highbury, why is she lurking around? Surely, she would have some kind of plan to carry out and not waste time scaring hapless travellers in byways.’

Master Knightley began to reply, but suddenly Myrtle went rigid. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘What?’

She held a hand up to silence him as she listened hard. Since being in the presence of the Green Lady, her senses were almost as sharp as if she had the enhancement of a moderate Dust spell upon them. ‘I think I heard a cry, a scream. From that direction.’ She pointed.

‘From Hartfield!’ Master Knightley’s hand moved instinctively to his hilt. ‘Remain watching the bridge, while I ride and see.’ And he was gone as quickly as he could untie his horse, mount up, and gallop away.

Another sound caught Myrtle’s ear, and she turned her head across the river to see the black crow-like bird squawking as though he were laughing at them. Myrtle swished her rowan staff in the air like a sword, and the bird quieted its screeching. The margool lifted his blue head from the water and gave a chirrup of excitement. ‘No, it’s a staff, not a stick for throwing. There’s no time for games now.’ The margool’s chirrup became a shrill whistle, and his long neck stretched up as though he were watching something in the sky.

Myrtle turned to see a witch, flying in a lurching, zig-zag motion across the sky and making an unearthly shrieking noise. Myrtle raised up her staff,

ready to protect herself should the witch fly at her, but the broom was heading over the river into the Wild Woods. The broom spiralled downwards. There was an explosion of smoke and foul-smelling stars and a last shriek, fading away to silence.

Myrtle ran to the bridge; it was invisible to the mortal eye, but she could just sense it as a ghostly shimmer. She hesitated; it would be foolish to cross over without any protection. The witch could be just inside. It was too much to hope that she was dead. What could destroy her that easily? She must only be injured, and likely was furious.

The crow on the tree on the other bank cawed at her; she attuned her senses towards it, trying to hear what it was saying. She could not discern words, but it was certainly mocking her, as though some malevolent plan were unfolding that was rather amusing to it.

She moved away from the bridge. She would be of no use to Rue if she got herself caught and bound. Something was going on, and she was torn between not wanting to leave her watch, and wanting to see if Master Knightley was well. But he had his sword, so she had better remain and keep guard. She lit her lamp as the last of the light faded, and wrapped her cloak tightly about her as she paced beneath the rowan tree, hearing nothing but owls and the occasional splash of the margool in the water as he played with fish before eating them.

Myrtle remained watching the river, feeling that there was something expectant in the air. Not a good expectancy, but something menacing. Her time in Faerie had sharpened her sensitivity to atmospheres, so she hunkered back down under her cloak, beneath the safety of the rowan tree, and she watched and waited.

AT MIDNIGHT she saw it come across the river. *Saw* wasn't the right word; she felt it; she sensed it, but the sensation was so strong, it was as if she did see it with her physical eyes.

It was like a cloud, heavy laden and about to burst. It glided out of the Wild Woods, across the river, Myrtle stood up to watch it as it stretched and grew, becoming thinner and diffuse, but spreading out long fingers towards Highbury. When it covered the whole of the village, from boundary to boundary, enveloping Donwell and Hartfield and all the farms and houses in between, then it released something like fine rain, and Myrtle watched as

the almost invisible fall of drops settled down over everything. She pulled her hood tightly over her head to keep the strange dewy drops from falling on her. She felt something alter in the air, another kilter in the atmosphere, as though everything tilted from one side to another. Something bubbled up inside her. What was it? It felt oddly like... happiness. A giddy, dizzy, drunken kind of happiness. As though the world were a bright place — the witch was gone! That wonderful, brave young hero, Frank Charmall — he had thwarted her, had saved all of Highbury! She could almost run to the village and shout it out!

Footsteps came thudding along, lantern lights swinging and flashing, and excitable voices ringing out.

‘Is she dead?’ called a voice. The baker’s son came into view, his face looking strange in the flickering light.

‘Did you see her?’ called another. It was the ostler from the crown.

‘Is she drowned in the river?’ shouted someone else, and a few people grouped on the river bank, looking down at the water. ‘There is something in there!’ bellowed one of them. ‘Get a stick!’

‘What are you looking for?’ Myrtle marched to the riverbank, pushing aside the young under-shepherd, who was about to jab his crook into the water. ‘Don’t stab your stick in there,’ she cried, fearing for the margool. But her voice was cheerful, despite the danger.

‘It might be the witch’s body!’ said the youth, just as cheerfully.

‘She didn’t fall in the river,’ said Myrtle, ready to clash staffs with him, though wanting to laugh at the same time. What was this drunken feeling?

‘Did you see her?’ was the general cry, as the small crowd pressed about her.

‘Yes,’ said Myrtle. ‘She fell into the woods. I saw her fall.’

Cheers resounded.

‘Was she dead?’

‘I don’t know. I doubt it.’

‘She must be! She took an arrow to the heart!’

More cheers.

‘Did she?’ Myrtle was surprised and delighted to hear this.

‘She near killed Mistress Woodhouse, but that Charmall fellow, he saved her — he’s saved us all!’

More cheers ran round.

‘Let’s get to the Crown!’ called out the under-shepherd, ‘and drink a toast to Charmall the witch-slayer!’

Another cheer, and the crowd tramped off again, their lanterns swaying wildly.

Myrtle enticed the margool out with a stick. She wanted to get to the village and join in the celebrations. The margool hopped close, shaking himself dry over her cloak, puffing green clouds at her, which she thought was his way of laughing. She laughed back, knowing that somehow her laughter was a little too high, a little off key. The margool tilted his head, as though he sensed something was wrong. He butted his head against her like a little goat, and as he touched her something shifted. The hilarity fled away with an unpleasant lurching sensation. She felt as though wakened from a dream, and blinked, looking about her. What had just happened? She stepped away from the margool and felt the drunken happiness tingle about her. Quickly she reached out, placing a hand upon the margool’s head, and the tingling vanished and the world was as it ought to be.

‘Very odd,’ Myrtle said, experimenting with moving away an inch at a time from the margool. She needed to be within a foot of him to keep the influence at bay. ‘Very odd indeed. That witch is more powerful than I imagined. A charm strong enough to enchant an entire village. I think we’d best get to Donwell and tell Master Knightley of this.’

THE HERO OF THE EVENING

Master Knightley rushed to Hartfield to find the courtyard full of servants in a state of excitement. 'What's happened?' he demanded, dismounting, and taking hold of a footman by the shoulder. 'Is anyone hurt?'

'No, sir. The mistress was pulled from the tower—'

'What!'

'Master Charmall saved her,' the footman assured him.

'From the witch,' added a maid.

'Where is she?'

'In the sitting room, sir,' said a gnomess maid. 'The blue one.'

'Is she harmed?' But Master Knightley didn't wait for an answer, he ran into the house to see for himself.

He found Emma in the sitting room, just as the maid had said, wrapped in blankets, being served her father's becalming tonic and calling for tea, while Frank recovered himself with Master Woodhouse's wine. The butler had brought the best and rarest wine of the cellar. The cook had begged that Master Charmall would refresh himself with the finest that Hartfield pantry had to offer. The housekeeper had run for cushions that Master Charmall might rest his head more comfortably against his chair.

'Master Knightley!' exclaimed Emma, seeing him enter the room. 'What an evening we have had!'

'So I gather,' said Master Knightley, crossing the room to reach her side. 'Are you well? Have you any injury? Has Perry been sent for?' His words tumbled out as his eyes ran over her, looking anxiously for any sign of injury or malicious spell working.

‘I am perfectly well. Only a little shaken.’

‘Is it true? The witch pulled you from the tower?’

The whole of the trial was related to him.

‘What if she had succeeded in carrying you off?’ he said, sinking down on the footstool beside her, feeling half furious and half sick at the thought.

‘I will admit to folly in sitting on the windowsill as I did,’ Emma said. ‘But as such a series of unfortunate circumstances shall never, I hope, occur again, it is safe for me to promise that I will not do so ever again, and, oh, I am *so* relieved to be free of my confinement and the threat of that disagreeable creature’s malevolence. What causes a person to become like her? She was once mortal, was she not? Once a child, a babe in arms.’

‘Choices, my dear Emma,’ said Master Knightley wearily. ‘She chose dark paths.’

‘I could almost feel sorry for one who has gone so deeply into vile ways,’ said Emma, ‘if she had not ruined my dignity by causing me to end up stranded on a roof in my nightgown for all the servants to see.’

‘Thank heavens you *were* set down upon it in once piece, why when I think—!’ He broke off, too distressed by the images of what could have happened.

‘All has ended well,’ Emma said, reaching out to touch his arm.

He clasped her hand, looking with great feeling at her. She looked as though she were moved by his touch and expression, and she leaned closer to him to say, ‘thanks to Master Charmall, all has ended well.’

Master Knightley glanced across to the young man in question, who raised his wineglass, and beamed at Emma, who gave a radiant smile in return.

Master Knightley drew back, feeling as though it were his own heart which had been pierced by the arrow of Frank Charmall.

‘Is it not a wonder and a mercy that Frank happened to be passing by armed with his bow?’ Emma said. ‘He saved poor Harriet this morning from the witch, and now he has entirely vanquished her, and finally I am free!’

Frank raised his glass again, and Emma raised her teacup, and the air between them shimmered with youth and happy spirits.

‘Has your father been told of what has happened?’ Master Knightley said, standing up and moving out of the circle of lamplight that shone between Emma and Frank Charmall.

‘Master Perry is with him now,’ said Emma. ‘We shall break the news to him a little at a time that he may not be overwhelmed. I thought it best not to show myself to him immediately. It would be a shock. But you are not going already, are you? You have not shared a celebratory glass of wine or a cup of tea with us.’

Master Knightley moved another step nearer to the door. ‘I wish to investigate the border. See if there is any evidence of the witch’s fall.’

‘Oh, she’s gone,’ said Frank cheerfully. ‘Never fear.’

‘All the same,’ said Master Knightley, not quite meeting the eyes of Frank, ‘I wish to see how things lie. I’ll return in the morning and see how you and your father get on. If you need anything, anything at all, be sure to send word to me.’

‘If you can be found,’ said Emma, a little petulantly. ‘It is not as if you are often sitting quietly at home where you can be easily reached. I thought you would be as delighted as I am at my freedom.’

‘Of course I’m delighted, Emma. But... witches are not so easily taken down with a single arrow.’

‘It was three, actually,’ said Frank. ‘I shot three arrows. That last one—’ he clasped a hand to his heart, ‘down she went!’

‘I hope it is true,’ said Master Knightley. ‘But without a body, we must still exercise caution. Take care, Emma, please.’

‘No harm will come to Mistress Woodhouse while I am near.’ Frank lifted his glass. ‘ Might I have another?’ he asked the waiting butler. His glass was promptly filled.

Master Knightley turned and left them. He had not forgotten his sighting of a man who looked very like Ben Larkins running through Gypsy Woods that morning. These night hours had become so busy. He would hurry back to the bridge and check if all was well with Sister Myrtle, see if she had seen anything of the witch passing over. If all were well, he would fetch one of the dogs and make another search for any signs of Ben. Perhaps he ought to have fortified himself with the offered wine and refreshment at Hartfield for the long hours of activity ahead, but the thought of sharing the same victuals as that of Frank Charmall quite took away his appetite.

QUINCE WAS the best of his spaniels for picking up a scent. They set out on the footpaths between Donwell and Highbury, across the common. The dog

soon picked up the trail of someone. She trotted along with her nose to the ground. ‘Good girl,’ Master Knightley encouraged. ‘Find him.’

Quince led the way, circling round bushes and winding back to the footpath until they reached the stile into Green Lane. She squeezed under it and was gone into the darkness. Master Knightley climbed over, one hand holding a lantern. He heard Quince bark, and quickened his pace, following the barking until he saw the glimmer of another lamp. ‘Who’s there?’ he called. ‘Ben, is that you?’ He reached Quince and raised his light to see a young woman trying to hush the excited dog.

‘Oh, it’s you!’ she cried with some relief. ‘I feared it might be a roamer or goblin, or something!’

‘What are you doing out here?’ he exclaimed in return. It was the young maid from Randalls – the daughter of the Woodhouse’s coachman.

‘I must get back,’ she said anxiously, not answering his question. ‘In case I’m missed.’

‘I should hope you are missed! I will escort you home. You ought not to be out after dark on your own.’

It crossed his mind that she might be in the way of a secret assignation with some young lover. He looked around for signs of such a person, but could see no one in the shadows. Quince was sniffing the ground, as though picking up another scent. He would have liked to let Quince lead him onward, but he could not let the girl walk back to Randalls alone; two young ladies had already been attacked that day.

‘Has your dog found a trail?’ the girl asked. ‘Is it good at finding people? It must be, for it found me out.’

‘She’s an excellent tracking dog, but you must get home directly.’

The girl ignored him. ‘I think she’s found something,’ and she took off into the dark behind Quince.

‘Hey, now just you—’ but dog and girl had gone. Master Knightley followed, feeling vexed, for he wanted very much to see what trail Quince had found, but very much did *not* want to be wandering about in the dark with an unchaperoned maid – what a scandal if anyone should see them.

His sense of propriety was about to gain the upper hand and cause him to call his dog and turn back, when he heard the girl call out, ‘She’s found something!’

‘What is it?’ Master Knightley raised his lantern to see. The girl held a scrap of fabric, barely larger than a thumbnail.

‘It’s a bit of his cloak,’ she said. ‘I’d recognise it anywhere.’

‘It’s so small, it could be anything. And whose cloak do you mean?’

‘It’s Ben’s,’ she said. ‘I know it is. He has a cloak of this same colour and weave. Look, it’s twill, not plain, and that shade of brown – it’s like the colour of Ben’s favourite horse, that’s what Ben used to say.’

Master Knightley was not convinced. Every working man in the county wore brown twill.

She turned the scrap over. ‘Green lining,’ she said with half a sob. ‘His ma sewed a green velvet lining for him. It’s quite fancy. It came from a cloak of yours, sir.’

‘Of mine!’

‘You gave it to your housekeeper to mend, but it was beyond mending, for it had too big a rip in it. You said it could be given away, so she gave it to Mistress Larkins and she turned it into a lining for Ben.’

Master Knightley looked more closely. The dark green velvet did look very like his old cloak. He looked sharply at the girl. ‘Are you and Ben Larkins engaged?’

She nodded, and her hand went to her neck and clutched at something she wore on a chain. He thought he saw it glow, as though it were an active charm.

‘Is that a ring?’

She shook her head and lifted the pendant. ‘It’s a charm. Ben said a witch had tried to kill him by choking him with a poisoned nut. He met a Wisewoman on his way back from Kingston market, and when he asked her, she gave him a charm to protect him from any more spells coming on him. ’Tis rare to meet a Wisewoman,’ she added. ‘And rarer still to get what you ask for from one.’ She clutched the charm tighter. ‘But he wanted me to have it. Said my life was more important to him than his own now that I was to be his wife, and it were the only thing of value he could give me for an engagement token.’ A tear rolled down her nose as she bent over the scrap of fabric. ‘But the engagement’s a secret,’ she whispered, as though Mistress Larkins might hear from over a mile away. ‘His ma wouldn’t be happy about it. He was waiting for the right time to tell her, but now he might never get chance. And if he’d kept the charm for himself, it might have kept him safe. I should never have let him give me it!’

The tear rolled down to her nose, and for a moment he thought she would weep over the scrap, and he moved back, a little uncomfortable. But

she dashed her tear away and shook the fabric at him. 'This is Ben's, I know it! He's alive, and he's been seen round here, I heard of it today, and I'm not going back till I find him, and then I defy his ma or any witch to keep us apart again!'

She turned to march on.

'Now just you wait!' He could not let her go alone, and clearly there was no persuading her to go back. He knew the evidence of heartfelt passion when he saw it. 'Listen, if the dog can pick up a trail, we'll follow it. But if she can't then we turn back and you will go home to bed and wait till daylight before you do any more searching, agreed?'

She paused. 'Agreed. Thank you, sir.'

'And no one must know about this!'

'No indeed, sir.'

'Midsummer madness,' he muttered. 'Go on, Quince. Find him!'

EVERY PLEASURE, EVERY SCHEME

The search for Ben Larkins ended in failure. It had seemed so promising. The scrap of cloak had served as a scent for Quince to follow, and the dog had sped off with all the single-minded passion of a spaniel on a trail. But the trail had ended abruptly in the outer grounds of Mother Goodword's school. Quince had circled round and round an empty part of the grounds where nothing but shrubs and wildflowers were to be found. It was frustrating and dispiriting, and young Hannah Hazeldene, Master Knightley, and Quince had returned to their respective beds to snatch a few short hours of sleep before the duties of a new day began.

'Sir!' called a voice as Master Knightley walked wearily down the hallway of Donwell to his breakfast.

Sister Myrtle was calling from the door to the library with a piece of parchment in her hand. 'I must speak with you. I've found something. Come and see.'

'It must wait until I've eaten,' he said. 'I'm famished.' His stomach growled, warning him not to delay meeting its needs a minute longer. These night time excursions made him feel as though he hadn't eaten for a week the following morning.

The Godmother girl frowned. She was rather fierce looking when she drew her black eyebrows together in that fashion with her deep blue eyes flashing beneath.

'Have you eaten?' he asked, recalling that she too had been on a night watch. 'Have you slept?'

She waved a dismissive hand. 'It's *extremely* important.'

‘Whatever it is, it can wait fifteen minutes longer. I’ll come directly,’ he promised, walking on, and calling over his shoulder, ‘I suggest you come and eat too.’

She did not join him for breakfast, and though he ate his fill, his enjoyment was thwarted by his butler’s repeated comments on what excellent news it was that the wicked witch had been vanquished by the bravery of that young man from Randalls. ‘He’s saved us all,’ said the butler, his usually reserved expression lit up with admiration. Harry, the footman, standing at the sideboard, beamed and nodded. ‘The curse is broken,’ whispered Harry, twitching as though he were stifling down the urge to do a jig.

‘Is it?’ Master Knightley said. ‘I don’t know that it is altogether broken.’

He thought of the Green Man’s injunction to bring before him the thief who had begun all this mischief. Unless the witch was the thief, the curse could not be entirely broken. But his butler and footman grinned and nodded to one, and it was then that it struck Master Knightley that they both looked a little odd. That beaming smile, that glow of the expression, it was somehow *off*. He could not explain it. Only that if something had been out of kilter in the air before, it had swung from gloom to gladness, like the swinging of a pendulum, or the swing of a weathervane when the wind abruptly changed. But change notwithstanding, it was *still* out of kilter.

He rubbed his forehead, thinking that perhaps he was suffering the effects of too little sleep over a long period of time. He had felt very peculiar himself when he awoke, almost as though he were tipsy, but as soon as he’d dressed, he felt fine again, other than the normal discomforts of too little sleep and food. He resolved to pay no attention to his staff and their eccentric behaviour. After all, it was only two days till Midsummer, and Midsummer madness was not merely a folklore expression.

He finished his meal quickly. He was anxious to see how Emma and her father were faring after the commotion of last night. He only hoped the Charmall fellow would not be there at so early an hour. Idle puppies like him usually did not rise till half the day was over.

He left his breakfast table, his sword clattering at his side as he stood up, for he had put it on after dressing. He was not convinced that all danger was past. It would take more than a cloud of smoke and sparks to assure him that the witch was truly no longer a threat to Emma.

Forgetting his promise to Sister Myrtle, and needing no coat or cloak to call for, as it was a glorious summer day, he set off.

HE FOUND Emma in the shrubbery, almost giddy with happiness, though he would never have used the word giddy in relation to her before.

‘You have no notion of how delightful it is to feel free!’ she cried. ‘Perry was able to give Papa the news of the witch’s demise, and Papa was so cheered that it has quite pulled him out of the dreadful stupor he has been in – so much so, he agrees to come down to breakfast today. It will be the first time since the morning of the ball at the Crown that he has left his rooms. But, Master Knightley, how is it you do not seem happy for me? Why so grave a countenance? How can anyone feel serious on such a glorious morning!’

She had a flower basket on her arm and a little pruning knife. She cut a stem of a rose and thrust it under his nose. ‘Does that not smell delightful? Oh, the whole world smells as a rose to me today!’

Master Knightley shook himself mentally. What was wrong with him? He ought to be pleased for Emma. She had lived all her life under the confinement of her father’s fears for her. He ought to be glad she was free. But he was not convinced that all threats were truly resolved. Was that the only reason for his grim mood?

‘Was it not a happy day, the day Master Charmall rode into Highbury?’ Emma said, laying the rose tenderly into her basket. ‘Who would have guessed he would be my rescuer, my liberator, when the most I hoped of him was that he might make a good dance partner? And he claims he is not even terribly practised at archery!’ She laughed.

‘A very lucky shot, then,’ said Master Knightley, trying to summon up a smile for Emma’s sake. ‘I am glad you are free from the tower. Not a day went by that I did not try to rouse your father to release you.’

‘I know,’ said Emma, bending to cut another rose. A tendril of her hair had worked loose from her pinned up braids; it brushed against her cheek and tickled her nose, causing her to wrinkle it. Instinctively he reached out and tucked the tendril behind her ear, his finger grazing her cheek. She looked up in surprise at his touch, and he stepped back again, feeling heat mount into his cheeks inexplicably. What *was* the matter with him today? Now he was acting like a love-struck schoolboy!

She blushed a little herself, but the moment of surprise passed and she only said, 'You and Mistress Weston were my unfailing supporters. And dear Harriet. She wrote to me every day to cheer me and sent up every romance story she could find. I'm only surprised not to have seen her this morning. I should think she had heard the news by now. My maid tells me Frank Charmall is lauded all over Highbury for saving first Harriet then myself, and lifting the dreadful curse from us all.'

'You think the curse is lifted? Has your father been before the Green Man?'

'Not yet.' Her expression dimmed a little. 'I think he is afraid. But Midsummer Day is almost upon us, and Papa will have to stand before him then.'

'Yes,' said Master Knightley gravely. 'He will indeed.'

'But let us speak of happier things!' cried Emma, tossing her rose into her basket. That same glow of fervour was in her eyes which he had noted in the face of his butler and footman that morning. Emma had now taken a seat on the garden bench between the rose beds, and he unbuckled his sword, feeling that it was an awkward heaviness to bear in that moment. He laid it on the ground and sat down beside her.

Something remarkable happened in that moment of sitting. He felt a lifting of all his doubts. He felt a warm sensation creep over him, settling down like a comfortable blanket. The world seemed suddenly brighter and lighter. Why had he been so concerned? All danger was gone. There was nothing to fear! This was a day to celebrate! The corners of his mouth slowly rose into a smile, almost against his will. It was a peculiar sensation, but it was almost as if he were being *compelled* to be happy!

'It has been a dreadful time, shut up away from you all,' said Emma. 'My idea of a good way to be relieved of all memory of such unpleasantness is to have some pleasantness.'

'And what kind of pleasantness were you considering?'

Pleasantness seemed most appropriate. Nothing pleasant should be denied her. The curse was lifted! The witch was gone! He could even feel a rush of gratitude and admiration for Frank Charmall – that happy young man of fortune's favour!

'Something out of doors, to celebrate my freedom and make the most of this weather. Is it not Midsummer Eve tomorrow? I must celebrate. We must all celebrate. All these years I have been shut up in Highbury, unable

to leave for fear of that witch, and now she is gone! Oh, I should like to go to the sea, Master Knightley, I should like to travel abroad, see towns and cities and coasts and islands and mountains!’

‘And you could persuade your father to let you go on such short notice?’

Emma’s exhilaration deflated a little. ‘No, indeed. Poor Papa, how could I forget him?’

‘I think islands and mountains are out of the question for a day’s outing, but will the highest point in the county suffice for a fresh vista?’

‘Highest point in the county?’

‘Pucks Hill. It is not so far. Less than two hours by carriage.’

‘Oh, Pucks Hill! I have always wanted to see the view from Pucks Hill! We could take a picnic. What a delightful scheme! We must ask our friends. Just a select party, I understand Mistress Elftyn was planning her own party to Pucks Hill, but we will not go with all the pomp and splendour of hers. I must go and see the Westons about it directly. Could we not go tomorrow? I can hardly wait!’

‘Tomorrow is a little short notice, but in the meantime, come to Donwell. Come and pick strawberries.’

‘A delightful plan,’ said Emma warmly. ‘I should like that above all things. Oh! – that will make our Puck’s Hill outing fall on Midsummer Day! There will be fairy rings and all manner of delightful entertainments.’ Emma clapped her hands with pleasure.

‘I shall go and give fair warning to my housekeeper.’ Master Knightley stood up.

‘Do not put her to any trouble,’ said Emma. ‘Not for my sake.’

‘Emma, my dear, this deliverance is a cause for celebration for us all. The threat of that witch has been hanging over us the whole of your lifetime. We shall do honour to the deliverance of the Green Man and the bravery of that excellent Charmall fellow by gathering our closest circle of neighbours about us. I shall send out invitations and arrange things so that even your father might come and be comfortable.’

He felt all the glow of a good plan forming, and his expression of happiness mirrored Emma’s.

‘We must persuade Papa to go. It would be excellent for his spirits. We have kept some details of my *adventure* from him, he only knows that

Frank Charmall has destroyed the witch and removed all threat, but as to how exactly it all came about...'

'It would not do to tell him all the details, not immediately,' agreed Master Knightley, thinking of the rush of horror he had felt in hearing of Emma being plucked from the tower and almost carried away to the witch's dark haunts. 'They will come out, of course, but better that they come out by degree with you safely before him.'

He bent down for his sword and buckled it on. Immediately he felt something shift again. It was so startling a change that he staggered a step, blinking with surprise. Gone was the sensation of warmth and euphoric happiness. Gone was the certainty that all was well, and no threat or curse remained. Gone were the warm feelings towards Frank Charmall. What was happening to him now? He looked at Emma, wondering if she felt the change in the air.

'A strawberry party!' said Emma, her eyes shining with that odd, almost unnatural glow. 'And Puck's Hill!'

SECRETS IN ALL FAMILIES

Myrtle had found something fascinating in the library early that morning, while Master Knightley still slept. The margool had left its place at her feet to chase a mouse across the floor, squealing with frustration as the mouse disappeared into the wainscoting. He pawed at the mouse hole, his talons making a scratching that was both distracting to her study, and alerted her to him damaging Master Knightley's woodwork.

His sudden movement away from her had another unwelcome consequence: as soon as he moved more than a foot from her, she felt that strange, dizzy feeling creeping over her, driving away all serious thought, suggesting to her that she had no need to be shut up inside studying intently, what was there to worry about anymore? She ought to be out in the sunshine, resting, relaxing, joining in the celebrations in the village... she threw herself across the room and down beside the margool, putting a hand on him that she might instantly feel reconnected to how things were, and not swept up into the spell of delusion that she had seen raining down over Highbury.

'Hey,' she said, poking the margool. 'Stop that. We're guests here, you can't go scratching holes in the walls.' He huffed orange clouds at her, letting her know that he did not appreciate interference in his hunting games, but she was struck by the colour of his head. It was glowing with a coppery hue.

'What's made you turn copper?' she wondered, kneeling next to him and feeling the panels on the wall. One of the panels rattled, as though it were not properly affixed. 'Let me borrow one of your claws.' She lifted a front foot to use his thick claw to prise open a gap beside the panel. A small

door opened with a squeak of old hinges, and inside was a book-sized chest covered in hammered copper.

‘Well, what is this?’ She lifted the lid to see sheaves of yellowing papers inside.

‘Come and lie down,’ she ordered, carrying the box to the table, all her tiredness from her night watch dissolving with the excitement of such an interesting find. The margool ambled to the table and flopped down under it with one last orange puff.

The paper formed an unbound book, made up of loose sheets, with close-written lines. Myrtle relished the smell and feel of the old paper; it fairly hummed with history and mystery. If the copper-plated chest had held a trove of diamonds, it could not have been more interesting to her. She lifted out the topmost page with reverent fingers, laying it on the table and pulling her lamp nearer.

Myrtle found it easier to read quietly aloud as she deciphered the old-fashioned hand and faded ink. ‘Oh, for Dust to make a translation spell,’ she murmured, thinking how much time it would save if she’d had magic to hand.

‘Here are recorded the histories of the joining of the houses of Tristin and Breandern from the time of their exile from Faerie Albion.’

She read of a forbidden marriage between a fae lady of noble standing, an attendant to the Faerie queen, no less, and a mortal man, brought into Faerie as a child; a boy-page grown to a high rank in the court, yet a servant and a mortal.

She read of the lovers’ escape from their binding to the court, their long wanderings and fantastic adventures through strange, enchanted lands as they fled from pursuit, and their rather anticlimactic settling down in Old England, over the border of Faerie, building a house of stone quarried from the cliffs of Cromer where merfolk had dwelt.

Myrtle read with interest, all the while wondering why such a history should be hidden away in Donwell. But as she read on, the history described the digging of a well whose water was prophesied to one day quench the fire of a great fire-wyrm. She read of the planting of an apple orchard taken from an apple seed from the Faerie queen’s own garden; she read of the subsequent marriage between the son of the couple and the Green Man’s own daughter and realised she was reading an old history of the Knightleys.

Master Knightley might be pleased with such a find, but though she enjoyed history, she had not time for reading for pleasure just now; she was here to study for something that would help with the current problems; she was here to study for some wisdom that she did not know she was missing until she found it. She'd thought, when she saw the papers, that it had been brought before her as something important, some hidden wisdom, such as the Green Lady said she must search for to aid her. But it was only a history account.

She stared at the empty box, feeling sure there was something more to this find. The height of the box was incongruent with the depth of the interior, and now that she focused properly on what sat before her, she sensed something *off*, as though there were some darkling magic about it.

'I wonder...' She pressed the thick base of the box, inside and outside, and on pressing hard on the back of it, something gave a soft *click* and the bottom of the interior lifted half an inch. 'A secret bottom. I knew there was something more.' But she hesitated, her hand hovering over the false lid. The sense of something dark grew stronger. 'I have to look,' she told herself. 'It might be important. These are desperate times.'

A small note lay above a wrapped parcel. The handwriting of the note matched that of the recorder of the history book.

Here is a volume taken by Tristin and the lady Breandern when they escaped from the house of the sorceress. I bind it away, not to be brought into the light until the time is nigh. Within these pages lies the secret of her power.

Wrapped in a thin hide was a second unbound book, older than the first, and written on vellum pages with a spidery hand in black un-faded ink.

The smell emanating from the pages made Myrtle draw back. It was unmistakably the smell of dark magic. She did not want to touch the vellum pages, and took up a paper knife to lift them over, scanning the words to see that it was made up of spells and chants and foul looking diagrams. The margool shifted under the table and rested his head on her foot. Instantly she felt better; the sense of dread eased. His touch emptied the spell on the letters, enabling her to read without the weight of oppression, though she still read with caution, for she had no wish to have darkling spells form in her mind.

The language was archaic and difficult to understand. Either it was an old language, or there was a spell upon it, to make it difficult to translate.

But the diagrams were easier to decipher, though Myrtle quickly passed over some vile ones detailing sacrifices on the night of the black moon. From what she could gather, the source of the sorceress's power lay in something called *nigrum fungus mortis*.

'Sounds like a mushroom,' Myrtle wondered aloud. 'That can't be right. How can a mushroom be the source of a great power?'

She heard footsteps in the hall outside the library door; that firm clack of boots with soles of midnight boar could only belong to one person. She picked up the topmost sheet of the history book and gained the door. 'Sir!' she called. He looked up, roused from his own thoughts. His eyes flickered first with surprise, then recognition. He looked tired. He still had his sword at his side, which was a good sign; hopefully it meant the spell she had seen fall over Highbury hadn't driven away the sense of danger from his mind.

'What is it?' he said, still walking.

'I must speak with you. And I've found something. Come and see.'

'It must wait until I've eaten,' he said. 'I'm famished.'

Myrtle frowned. What was the matter with the man? Putting his stomach above such important knowledge as she had found.

'Have you eaten? Have you slept?'

She waved away his shallow questions. 'It's *extremely* important.'

'Whatever it is, it can wait fifteen minutes longer. I'll come directly,' he promised, walking on, and calling over his shoulder, 'I suggest you come and eat too.'

'Eat?' said Myrtle. 'There's a spell over Highbury, and my friend is captive in Faerie, and you think breakfast is more important?'

But he was gone, his long stride carrying him quickly away.

She returned to the desk, but suddenly felt weary from her long hours of close study, following a night of very little sleep. Her stomach growled, and she wondered if Master Knightley had a point about the importance of breakfast. The margool had eaten his fill of fish in the river last night, but he would be wanting more food soon.

'Perhaps we ought to go down to breakfast,' she decided. But she must not forget that she still had an important assignment from the Green Lady to fulfil. She drew out the list of names from her pocket and regarded it with heaviness. She had worked hard at observing and speaking with every person on the list, but she was up to 'W', and there were not many names left on it. She sighed, and the margool moved closer, putting his head on her

foot. At his touch, she saw something ripple across the list. She frowned and looked again. The list was the same, but – wait! There was a name missing. How could she have missed it? How could Harriet have not noticed it before?

She pulled her foot away, and there was another ripple across the page, and a blur of confusion fell across her thoughts. What name was it she had forgotten? It eluded her. She touched the margool again, and now it was clear!

‘I’ve got to see Harriet about this,’ she said, jumping up, forgetting all about breakfast and Master Knightley as she hurried out, with the margool at her side.



HARRIET HAD BEEN diligent in watering and pruning Mother Goodword’s plants, and checking all the protection charms on the doors and windows were in place. Busie kept the rooms spotless, and the gnome kept the gardens tidy. But who would tend to the bees? Harriet found that she needed to learn a good deal of new things in the time she spent alone in the school. The library bookshelves felt her fingers running across them as she searched for *Handbook for Beekeeping*, *Receipts and Remedies for the Benefits of House Sprites*, *The Art of Persuasion Without Magic*, and *Indoor Woodworking Solutions for Dull Elves and Mortals*.

She discovered that books could be very useful, whereas she had previously thought any book that did not contain pictures or a theme of romance was dry and tedious. The fern sprite in the library was more than just the unsociable sprite she had always thought him; it turned out that he was merely shy, and when she took the time to get to know him she learned that he lived in the library for a very good reason – other than he liked the shaped of fern leaves – he knew all the contents of every book on the shelves. He was a librarian sprite, to her great astonishment. With his help, she could find anything she needed to know.

It turned out that all the sprites in the school had some very useful gifting. No wonder Mother Goodword had shown them such respect. While everyone thought them merely decorative, or irritating, they all served a useful purpose in the school, but only for those who cared to learn it.

Harriet was finding a lot of surprising things about herself in these weeks. She discovered she *could* check and feed the bees, unblock a chimney, mix up new batches of ointments and powders for the apothecary storeroom, manage the orders from the butcher, fishmonger and dairy, read books with no pictures, negotiate with stubborn sprites and sylphs, and she was beginning to understand Cloe-Claws's thoughts very well. They were having regular conversations now, and Cloe-Claws really was quite a wise old cat after all. And if Harriet bore three bee stings, had ruined two aprons with pollen and soot stains, made a silly error in mixing up English wood moss with the Faerie beard-moss so that her headache balm caused black hairs to sprout on her temples, at least the hair-sprouting was temporary and no one except Cloe-Claws saw her error.

There were some jobs that Harriet could not manage on her own so well: her attempts at repairing the shutters on the dining-room window were clumsy, and she worried that the woodpile for the kitchen range was getting low. Usually Master Martin brought round logs, which he said were surplus to the needs of the farm, and he would chop them and stack them. She sighed over the almost empty woodshed.

'What should I do about the wood?' she asked Cloe-Claws, who accompanied her on her daily chores. 'I don't think we've enough to last to the end of the week.'

Cloe-Claws flicked her ears to show she was listening and calmly groomed her paws as though she did not consider the problem to be a real difficulty. Where previously Harriet would have only seen a cat ignoring her, now she understood Cloe-Claw's language. 'Very well,' she said, closing the woodshed door. 'I won't worry about it a minute more.'

Sure enough, when Harriet returned home later that morning, after a busy round of sensing-work visits in the village – sensing for sign or word that someone was about to get engaged, or was a wand thief – she found the woodshed door ajar, and peeking inside saw the wall filled with neatly stacked split logs.

'A wood elf?' Harriet asked Cloe-Claws.

Cloe-Claws thumped her tail, informing Harriet not to be so foolish. Not unless the wood elf was six feet tall and drove a cart and whistled '*There was a maiden sweet and fair, with Midsummer orchids in her hair...*' as he stacked logs.

‘Oh!’ said Harriet, blushing and feeling all frothy inside. ‘That is Robert Martin’s favourite song. It was him who called. He really is so very kind.’ And she wondered why that made her feel like crying.

Cloe-Claws distracted her from crying, by swelling up into double her size and growling fiercely. Harriet knew what Cloe-Claws was saying now.

‘Myrtle!’ called Harriet. She pushed the woodshed door shut and went to meet her fellow Sister. ‘Don’t worry,’ she called over her shoulder at the alarmingly large cat, ‘she knows not to bring it any closer than the meadow garden. Cloe-Claws growled that the unnatural monster had better not try. One step insider her school and he’d soon find out what these claws were for.

‘I’M GLAD YOU’VE COME,’ said Harriet, hurrying to meet Myrtle. ‘I’ve felt so strange all morning. I can’t understand it. When I’m here at the school, I feel quite my normal self, with a few ups and downs, but I always have a few of those these days—’

‘But when you’re outside the school gates you feel as though you ought to be wonderfully happy?’

‘Why, yes! And everyone in Highbury is so *very* wonderfully happy! The witch is gone, and Frank Charmall, who was so brave and kind in rescuing me on that horrible morning—’ here Harriet gave a little shiver at the remembrance – ‘and now he has saved Mistress Woodhouse, and the whole village is calling for him to become the new Wild Man Guardian, for poor Master Woodhouse has been so horribly indisposed since the night you told us of the witch coming, and I’ve been so happy in thinking that if the witch is defeated, then Rue will be free and will come home – do you think we should try to find her? Though it would be a great risk to go into Faerie, for we might not cross paths with her, and then we might be caught there for years, and I thought perhaps we could ask Master Charmall to—’

‘We can’t do anything other than what we’ve been charged to do,’ interrupted Myrtle, putting a hand up to halt Harriet’s flow of pent-up thoughts. ‘If there’s one thing I learned from the Green Lady, it’s that we must keep to the path we are given, even if another looks better. Not all that glitters is gold, as the proverb book says.’

Harriet nodded. She had been pacing a little as her thoughts had tumbled out. Now she perched on the edge of a low box hedge. ‘You are

right. We must stick to the plan. But Myrtle, I have been to every house in Highbury and have not sensed any clue as to the thief, and I have not found any clue as to who might be about to get engaged. Have you had any better luck?’

‘That’s exactly what I’ve come about,’ said Myrtle. She sat next to Harriet and pulled out a well-worn list. ‘Look at this,’ she said, thrusting it into Harriet’s hands.

‘It’s the list of all the residents in Highbury. I gave you it. Mistress Woodhouse and I wrote them all down—’

‘In alphabetical order,’ finished Myrtle. Her eyes flashed a mix of eagerness and impatience. ‘Look again at the list. Someone is missing. Under B.’

Harriet stared at the list and read aloud: ‘*Bampton, Barnes, Barrow, Bowman, Brownfeather.*’ She gave a little shake of her fair head. ‘I don’t think anyone is missing.’

‘Baytes,’ said Myrtle. ‘You haven’t got them down.’

‘Haven’t I?’ Harriet leaned over to see. ‘Are you sure it’s not there?’ She sounded confused. Myrtle looked sharply at her.

‘Can’t you see it for yourself? Look,’ she pointed near the top of the list. ‘Between Barrow and Bowman, that’s where Baytes ought to be.’

Harriet squinted. ‘It’s so odd,’ she said, ‘but when I look at the list and think about what you’re saying, something fuzzy happens in my brain.’

‘It’s a spell,’ said Myrtle.

‘Spell?’

‘A protective spell, to keep you from thinking of the name Baytes in connection to the theft.’

Harriet stared at her. ‘I don’t understand. Who would put a protection spell on the name of Baytes? And if it’s working on me, why isn’t it working on you?’

‘It was working on me, but when I touch the margool, he someone absorbs magic, and the spell doesn’t work. You try it. Go on, put your hand on him.’

Harriet flinched and drew back.

‘He won’t bite.’ Myrtle snatched at Harriet’s hand and put it on the margool’s head. ‘Look at the list!’

Harriet hurriedly scanned the list and gave an ‘Oh!’ of surprise. ‘I see it now! I see that Baytes is missing! How very odd. But what can it mean?’

‘That’s what we need to find out. Shall we go?’
Harriet stood up. ‘To be sure we shall!’

AN EFFUSION OF LIVELY SPIRITS

‘**K**eeep within a yard of the margool,’ Myrtle said. ‘Or the spell will affect you.’

‘It’s hard to keep within a yard when I can’t see him,’ Harriet said. Looking down rather pointlessly, for the margool had Myrtle’s forgetfulness cloak tied about him.

‘I’ll keep him between us. Stay close.’

‘I’ve never seen Highbury so busy,’ said Harriet as they walked down the Broadway to the house where the Bayteses lodged. ‘It’s busier than May Day and Midsummer all together.’

The streets certainly were busy with folk talking and laughing. The Crown Inn was overflowing with revellers; they stood out in the street with their tankards, toasting Master Charmall and singing songs of heroes of old. But there was a glassy look in everyone’s eyes.

‘This is a powerful enchantment,’ marvelled Myrtle.

‘Somehow it seems worse to see everyone so happy when they ought to be alert to danger, than if everyone were worried beyond measure,’ said Harriet, stepping aside as a child’s wooden hoop rolled down the street towards her. The margool gave a squeal and Myrtle sensed him pouncing away, chasing the rolling hoop down the street.

‘Oh no!’ cried Myrtle, realising the danger this put them in. ‘Come back!’

But it was too late. She and Harriet staggered a step and bumped into each other and burst into laughter.

‘What a wonderful day!’ cried Harriet. ‘The witch is dead! Long live Frank Charmall!’

‘Charmall for Guardian!’ shouted a passer-by. Others joined in. ‘Charmall for Guardian! The hero of Highbury!’

HARRIET CHEERFULLY WAVED goodbye to Myrtle and tripped up the broadway to Hartfield. She could hardly wait to celebrate with dear Mistress Woodhouse! She wanted to hear every word of all that happened. She wanted to know exactly how wonderful, marvellous Frank Charmall had saved her!

‘A STRAWBERRY PARTY!’ said Harriet. ‘How delightful! I have never been inside Master Knightley’s house. Is it quite as grand as it looks outside?’

‘Grand enough for a bachelor gentleman,’ replied Emma. They strolled beneath the shade of the trees in the avenue. Their walk was of a wayward, convoluted fashion, as though even their feet were overcome with the giddiness in the air. Harriet was finding the urge to skip and twirl irresistible, and her schoolgirl giggle had returned.

‘Donwell is very old,’ said Emma, as though it were a great joke. ‘Almost as old as the tower. It has not all the comforts of Hartfield. Large, old houses have a tendency to draughts and uneven floors, but it is a noble residence.’

‘Very noble, I’m sure,’ agreed Harriet. ‘How could such a man as Master Knightley live in anything other than a very noble and grand house.’ She gave a little twirl.

‘Very true.’

‘If he were to marry,’ said Harriet brightly, ‘I wonder if there would be many changes made to the house. Mistress Elftyn made so many changes to Master Elftyn’s house.’

‘And none of them for the better,’ said Emma, but then felt that she was too happy that morning to be ungracious, even to Mistress Elftyn. ‘Master Knightley shall never marry,’ asserted Emma with a smile.

‘What, never?’

‘Never. I am quite convinced of it.’

‘Nor I,’ said Harriet. ‘I shall never marry.’

‘This is a new resolution.’

‘It is one that I shall never change, however.’

‘I hope it is not in compliment to Master Elftyn?’

‘Master Elftyn indeed!’ Harriet laughed. ‘How can any woman think of such a man as *he* when there is such a man as Master Charmall in the world!’

‘Very true!’ Emma’s smile turned to a frown. ‘Do you care for Master Charmall?’

‘Every maiden in the kingdom must be in love with Master Charmall,’ cried Harriet. ‘Do you not think so? Do you not think him the handsomest and bravest man among any you have ever known?’

‘Why, to be sure.’ Emma was passing through the shadow of the Great Hall at this moment, while Harriet danced in the sunlight. As the shadow enveloped Emma, and the ancient stones were close enough to her bare arm for her to feel their hum of magic, she shook her head, as though something were troubling her mind and causing confusion.

Harriet gave a dramatic sigh. ‘If Master Charmall were to be in love with me, then I surely should marry. But it is you he loves, Mistress Woodhouse. And who can blame him?’

‘Me?’ Mistress Woodhouse put her hands to her temples as though in pain. Harriet did not notice; she was too busy dancing between a row of larches as though weaving through Maypole ribbons.

‘What a pity we could not have another ball,’ Harriet called out. ‘But a strawberry party will be delightful. And a picnic on Pucks Hill! Oh, the magic of Midsummer!’ She whirled back to Mistress Woodhouse with bright eyes and cheeks. ‘And it is my birthday too! What a delightful way to spend my birthday. And how propitious a time Midsummer Night is for matters of the heart.’

‘Indeed,’ said Mistress Woodhouse, passing the hall and stepping out of its shadow and beyond the reach of its stones. She blinked hard, as though she were having trouble seeing properly.

‘Who shall say if you will do more than dream of your husband-to-be on Midsummer Night?’ Harriet said, re-joining Mistress Woodhouse. ‘Wonderful things do happen at Midsummer when one dwells so close to Faerie.’

‘Very true, Harriet. Wonderful things do happen at Midsummer.’



BY THE TIME Myrtle had recovered the margool, appeased the child with a shilling to buy a new hoop, after his had seemingly disappeared into thin air, there was no Harriet to be seen.

Threatening to put the margool back on a lead if he ate any more children's toys, she recovered her mind and memory and returned to the door of the Baytes house. She could hear the sound of music from the sitting room on the first floor. Someone was playing the spinet with great skill.

The door was opened by a woman in an apron with floury hands. She looked Myrtle up and down and promptly shut the door again.

'Excuse me!' cried Myrtle, knocking on the door.

'Go away!' called back the servant, her voice muffled through the wood.

'I've come to speak to Mistress Baytes!'

'The mistress said I was never to let any Godmothering sort come in.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know. Not my place to ask questions. But it were a very particular order.'

'Harriet has been here many a time,' Myrtle argued.

'She don't count as a Godmother. She don't have a Godmother name.'

'Poor Harriet,' Myrtle murmured. 'Look, I just need a quick word.'

But the sound of a bolt was slid across the door. Myrtle knocked again and again, but in vain.

'Well, how *rude*. But I should have expected something like this.' She pondered over the tone and expression of the servant; she had not seemed under the influence of what Myrtle was now thinking of as the *High Glee and Hero Spell*. That could only mean that within the Baytes house was magic enough to block the effects of the spell outside. That was an important clue in itself.

She determined that the best thing was to return to Donwell, for she still had not had the chance to speak to Master Knightley about the spell and all she'd found in his library.

'If I can't get in by regular means,' said Myrtle under her breath, 'I shall have to try another way. But I *will* get in. There's a clue to be found, perhaps even a thief, and I won't rest till I've found it.' She cast a glance

over her shoulder as she walked away, and saw a curtain twitch at the upstairs window.



‘I THINK there is someone knocking at the door, ma’am,’ Frank Charmall said to Mistress Baytes. He was in her snug little sitting room enjoying some respite from the adulation in the streets outside. Jane was playing on the spinet, and he was turning the pages for her, and selecting songs that they had danced to when they had first met the autumn before.

‘Is there?’ said Mistress Baytes. ‘I did not hear above the music. Let me see.’

‘Sit down, Hetty,’ said Dame Baytes sharply. ‘Patty will get the door if there is someone there.’

Mistress Baytes had half risen from her chair. ‘Patty is making a pie crust, Mother. She will have flour all over her hands. She will not want to leave her pastry.’

‘She’s a servant. Sit down!’ Little old Dame Baytes was so fierce that Mistress Baytes dropped back into her chair.

Frank stepped to the window and looked out. ‘It’s one of the Godmother Sisters,’ he said.

‘Call to her to come straight up,’ cried Mistress Baytes, always delighted to have a visitor.

‘Do not touch that window!’ cried Dame Baytes.

Jane stopped playing. ‘Grandmama, are you well?’ she asked in her sweet, clear voice. ‘You seem agitated.’

‘I don’t wish to see anyone else today,’ said Dame Baytes, waving her knitting needles so fiercely that the stitches slid off. Jane and her aunt shared a look of concern.

‘Let me put your rows back on,’ said Jane, taking the two small steps between the spinet and her Grandmother’s chair.

‘The young lady has gone,’ said Frank, dropping the curtain.

‘Perhaps she only called with a message,’ said Mistress Baytes, a little distressed at this sudden break in family harmony and village hospitality. ‘Else Patty would have sent her up, I’m sure.’

Dame Baytes sank back against her chair, closing her eyes a moment as though she were suddenly very tired. 'Go back to playing, my dear,' she said weakly, waving Jane away. 'I like to see you there with Master Charmall turning the pages for you. Go on.'

'Sadly I must be going,' said Frank.

'So soon?' said the three ladies together.

'I promised Mistress Weston to be home promptly for dinner.' He flashed a golden smile and made a bow of farewell.

'I will see you to the door,' said Jane quietly.

'Aye, do,' urged her aunt. 'And ask Patty if there are any messages. I wonder what the Sister called for. Was it Sister Harriet or the tall one with the remarkable blue eyes?'

Frank did not answer, he was too busy putting his hat on and straightening his cravat. One of the reasons he enjoyed the humble comforts of the Baytes's sitting room, was that his band beneath his cravat did not feel so tight when he was here, in the same way he felt some relief once behind the charmed lions of his father's house. 'I daresay I'll get mobbed on the way home,' he said with another smile.

'That's what happens when you're the hero of the whole village,' said Jane with a glow of pride. Her glow quickly dimmed again.

'What is it?' Frank whispered. They had left the sitting room and were making a slow descent down the dark, narrow staircase.

'Have you heard what the village is saying?' Jane whispered back. 'They are calling for you to become the new Wild Man Guardian. They say that Master Woodhouse is too feeble to carry out his duties, that it was you who rid the village of the darkling folk, when Master Woodhouse would do nothing.'

'It's only tittle-tattle,' said Frank. 'Don't let anything you hear disturb you, my darling.' A shadow passed over his face. 'I wish I could tell you about—' he winced and fell silent, his words choked off.

Jane was silent for a moment, watching his face. Then she said in faint whisper, 'Do you care for her?'

'For who?'

Another pause. 'Mistress Woodhouse. To be the new Guardian, you would have to marry Mistress Woodhouse. You seem to get on very well. You danced more with her than anyone else at the ball. Everyone talks of you as a delightful couple.' Jane's voice quivered.

Frank reached one hand to Jane's waist to pull her to him and the other hand tilted her face to meet his eyes. 'If we did not have to keep our engagement a secret, I should never dance with anyone ever again, save you. You alone have my heart. Do you believe me?'

Jane looked back, examining his expression. She gave a soft sigh and said, 'Yes, Frank. I believe you.'

'Good.' He pulled her tighter to him and kissed her until she pushed him away again, saying breathlessly, 'Frank, we mustn't. Patty will see us if she comes to the stairwell.' But she was smiling at him now, and he grinned back and snatched one last kiss.

'Don't forget,' he said in parting. 'No matter what gossip you hear! Promise?'

She nodded, watching him walk away down the street and smiling to see a gaggle of children running after him singing out, 'Charmall the witch slayer! Charmall the champion!' He tossed pennies down the road and laughed to see them run after them and give him chance to escape.

His laughter and smiles fled when he turned into Randalls road and saw the crow waiting for him.

'What now?' he muttered, snatching at the message tucked into the ring on the bird's leg.

Make the engagement tomorrow.

It must be done by Midsummer Eve before the spell fades.

Or else.

'Or else what, Aunty?' growled Frank. But the band beneath his cravat gave a warning tingle. 'You can go now,' he told the bird who was blocking his way to the gates. 'Go on.'

The crow cawed harshly.

'Tell her I got the note. I'll propose tomorrow.'

It cawed again in reply and mounted up, diving at Frank's head in its usual parting joke.

Frank hurried to step inside the protection of the gateposts and rested his head on a stone lion's paw. 'What am I going to do? How am I going to get free? Oh, that I were Charmall the witch slayer in truth!'

TIME & CHANCE

Myrtle had gained a burst of inspiration that evening, and rushed to the school where Harriet, released from her bout of be-spelled glee, was recovering from so much unnatural dancing and high spirits.

‘Harriet!’ Myrtle shouted, calling up to the third floor where the Sisters’ bedrooms were.

The little window was open to the summer evening. Harriet’s sleepy head poked out.

‘What is it? I said I was sorry about running away to Hartfield, it was the—’

‘Try the sword, Harriet!’

‘Sword?’

‘Lady Stormont’s sword! Master Knightley’s sword keeps him from the influence of the spell. Try Lady Stormont’s sword and see if it does the same.’

Harriet came into the courtyard in her nightgown, brandishing the sword, looking like a warrior maiden with her fair hair loose about her shoulders, her white nightgown flowing in the evening breeze while she waved the glittering, silvery blade. The margool ran in a circle around her, his head turning silver.

‘I think you ought to keep it sheathed,’ Myrtle advised, moving well out of the way of the swinging blade.

‘Sorry! I just get such a feeling of being *strong* and brave when I hold it,’ said Harriet, putting it carefully away into its scabbard.

‘Let’s step out of the gates and see if the spell affects you. You might want to cover your nightgown.’

Harriet danced with happiness a second time that day on finding that she was immured from the effects of the *High Glee and Hero Spell* while she held the ancient sword of Lady Stormont.

They agreed that Harriet could now safely attend the party at Donwell in the morning, where she could exercise her sensing on those present and watch out for any new dangers. 'Who knows what the witch is planning next,' said Myrtle. 'But it likely involves Mistress Woodhouse.'

'I shall be her protector,' said Harriet proudly, clutching the sword and scabbard to her chest. She frowned. 'But what will people think of me carrying it to a strawberry party? I was planning to wear my blue-spotted muslin and straw bonnet. It will look a little odd.'

'You'll think of something. We'll meet up when you come back. I'll be calling at the Baytes house in the morning.'

'But they will all be at the strawberry party,' said Harriet.

'All the better. I can search their house. I'll need to borrow your cloak.'

Harriet quailed, recalling the night they had searched Master Elftyn's cottage for similar reasons. But her hand moved to the sword, and she drew herself up straight. The search must be made for the sake of Rue and Mistress Woodhouse, and all the village besides.



'ARE you sure about the donkey, ma'am?' Master Coles' groom repeated. 'He's a tad skittish. Bit unpredictable. If it weren't for the stable brownie taking a liking to him, the master would have sold him on.'

The donkey in question stood in his stall looking calm and quiet enough to belie the groom's accusations. The donkey's tail and mane were very neatly plaited and tied with scarlet ribbons, a sure sign that he was a favourite of the stable guardian.

'He looks perfectly amiable to me,' argued Mistress Elftyn, liking the look of the ribbons. 'And I am quite sure I know how to manage a donkey. My sister Selina always says I am quite the picture of a May Day queen when sat upon a donkey.'

'Tis June now,' said the groom.

'Then I shall be a Midsummer queen.'

‘There’s the pony,’ the groom suggested, nodding at the next stall where a small, grey pony looked longingly at the dahlias on Mistress Elftyn’s hat.

‘Oh, no. If you had a nice little white pony that might do, but I cannot arrive at Donwell on a grey old thing. I am the particular guest of Master Knightley. I must set the tone. It would not do to arrive on foot, all dusty and hot. I must have the donkey seeing as you only have an old grey pony.’

‘The donkey’s grey.’ The groom lifted his hat and scratched his head.

‘But he is a very nice shade of grey. And he looks so smart in his plaits. Do you think the ribbons could be changed to pink? That would match the ribbon on my basket.’

‘There’s no telling brownies what to do, ma’am,’ said the groom, glancing about him as if in fear of being overheard. He dropped his voice to a whisper. ‘He’s very particular. Mustn’t offend him, or he can turn spiteful and play a mean trick.’

‘Oh, do not tell me about rogue brownies, I know all about *them*!’

The groom waved his hands in a gesture of appeasement. ‘Do not speak ill, ma’am, I beg thee.’

‘Put his saddle on and bring him round to my gate in half an hour,’ ordered Mistress Elftyn. ‘With *pink* ribbons.’

The groom scratched his head after her departing figure.

‘There would be an extra spoon of cream in the porridge for any who would change red ribbons for pink!’ he called out. That was all he could do. The request was given, but woe betide any who tried to order a brownie around, even if the witch was dead and all were in a mind to celebrate!



‘MAKE sure there’s the best of everything laid out for lunch,’ the housekeeper told the cook. ‘*He* is coming. Master Charmall himself.’

The cook’s eyes shone. ‘I’ve made a cheesecake, and I’ll make custard pudding next *and* lemon ice. I sent word to the kitchen at Randalls, and the cook said that Master Charmall is very partial to lemon ice.’

‘Plenty of cold beef,’ said the housekeeper. ‘Gentlemen generally like beef above all other meats. Especially strong, handsome men like Master Charmall. The beef feeds the blood, you know. Makes it red and hearty.’

‘Be sure to tell the butler to put out the best madeira,’ said the cook. ‘That’s his favourite tippie. So elegant. Most men drink common port and beer, but Master Charmall, he’s what I call a real fine gentleman.’

Myrtle was overhearing this conversation as she passed through on her way from the pantry. She’d had a couple of clashes with the housekeeper about taking meat and fish away, but Master Knightley had given her permission to take what she needed for the margool.

‘Not that!’ cried Mistress Hodges, whisking a plate of roast beef from the pile of dishes Myrtle carried. ‘That’s Master Charmall’s favourite.’ She glared at Myrtle, who gave her an icy glare in return and carried on her way.

‘There’s something unnatural about that Godmothering girl,’ the housekeeper said to the cook. Myrtle had left the room, but she could still hear them. ‘She don’t say a word about Master Charmall, she just looks all serious, just like the master.’

‘Very odd indeed,’ agreed the cook. ‘Browne said that when he took the master his morning tea, the master had slept with his sword right next to him on the bed.’

‘How very odd. We don’t need swords anymore, not when we’ve got Master Charmall and his bow and arrow among us. Put some more strawberries on that cheesecake.’

‘Will do, Mistress Hodges.’



‘I DO WISH you would forgo the donkey, Augusta, my love. There is something decidedly odd about it.’

‘My dear Master E, there is something decidedly odd about all donkeys, they are very odd creatures, to be sure. But I have quite made up my mind to riding it, though I am vexed beyond words that the groom did not do as I said about the ribbons. That shade of scarlet quite clashes with my shell pink. Take the lead, Master E. No, the harness lead. Walk beside me. A little behind, or you will quite obscure me. How do I look? How do I do?’

‘Delightful,’ murmured Master Elftyn obediently. ‘As a...’ He rummaged for the appropriate simile, farmer’s wife would not do, though that was what came to mind when he thought of donkeys. ‘...as a Faerie queen.’

‘Faerie queen indeed!’ Mistress Elftyn’s laughter rang out and up and down Green Lane. Every sprite was peering out of trees and bushes, watching her pass by, and joining in her laughter. ‘Why, you are a romantic, Master E, quite the romantic.’

‘Shall we take the shortcut over the common, my dear?’ Master Elftyn suggested.

‘Across the common – no indeed! Who should see me passing across the common? We shall walk down the Broadway and down Donwell Road, calling upon Mistress Baytes and Jane on the way. How could you forget that we were to call upon Jane and Mistress Baytes? What a memory you have, my dear, quite like a flour sieve, however did you manage without me?’

‘He keeps rolling his eyes,’ Master Elftyn said. ‘I don’t know much about donkeys, but I don’t think it a good sign for it to be rolling its eyes.’

‘Oh, you are quite a worrier where I am concerned. But donkeys are very odd creatures, as I said. Give it a carrot. There are some in my basket.’

But the donkey would not be bribed into a good mood by a carrot; he snatched it from Master Elftyn’s hand and threw it into the road. A pair of elderflower sprites laughed with delight at this and flew about the donkey’s head.

‘Get away,’ growled Master Elftyn, swiping at the sprites. ‘Go and tease something else, you little maybugs.’

Master Elftyn’s insult resulted in him now having a pair of indignant sprites to contend with, as well as a discontented donkey. The sprites flew about Master Elftyn, tugging his cravat out of shape and knocking his hat off. When Mistress Elftyn cried out at them and swatted them with her basket, they turned on her and undid all the bows on her cape and threw down all the dahlias in her hat brim.

The donkey was growing more restless, tugging his head, as though he resented the lead. Then he stopped, stood in the middle of the lane, staring at something at the other end of it.

‘Get along with you, donkey,’ Mistress Elftyn said, ‘or we shall be late.’ The sprites had flown off, leaving a trail of dahlia petals fluttering down.

‘Who is that, Master E?’ said Mistress Elftyn, peering down the lane. ‘I don’t recognise him. He looks a little wild, he’s not one of those roamers, is he?’

‘Where, my love?’ said Master Elftyn, who had been retrieving his hat from the top of a bramble bush.

‘Why there, look! Standing at the end of the lane. I think he’s watching us. I think he’s up to mischief, Master E. You must go and accost him and defend me. Go along!’

Master Elftyn shaded his eyes from the brightness of the morning and looked down the lane. ‘He looks familiar,’ said Master Elftyn. ‘I have seen him about Donwell. In fact, I think it may be the son of Knightley’s steward. The one who went missing.’ He moved forward. ‘Hie there! Is that you, young Larkins?’

To the great astonishment of the Elftyns, the tall, curly-haired youth dropped onto all fours and began braying like a donkey. At this sound, the donkey beneath Mistress Elftyn made a peculiar noise, more like a shout than a bray, and charged forward to meet the odd creature in the road.

Mistress Elftyn shrieked as she bounced up and down, trying to hold her new hat on and cling to the saddle at the same time. When the donkey reached the end of the lane and paused, she made haste and leapt from her mount, staggering away from the mad young man who sounded like a donkey and the donkey whose bray sounding like a shout, and she ran, stumbling and tripping over her frilled hems and shrieking that there was Midsummer madness afoot!



MYRTLE WAS PLEASED to find the door to the Baytes house unbolted. She crept into the dark and tiny hallway, herself and the margool each wrapped in a forgetfulness cloak and invisible to mortal eyes. It was fortunate the Bayteses did not have a brownie.

The maid was clattering pots in the kitchen and did not hear the slight groan of the door. Myrtle crept up the stairs, wincing every time a floorboard squeaked, and hoping the margool would not take it into his head to start ‘talking’ in squeals, squeaks and chirrups, as he frequently did.

She gained the top step and pushed at the sitting-room door, which stood ajar. The upstairs floor was uneven, and the door swung inwards on its own after just a tap. A shout from below made Myrtle jump.

‘Pardon me, ma’am,’ bellowed the maid from the bottom of the stairs.

Myrtle froze. How did the maid know she was there?

‘Just nippin’ to the bakery. Be two shakes of a lamb’s tail!’ The front door downstairs closed with a little bang. The door to the sitting room swung fully open and a voice from within cried out, ‘Who’s there!’

A POOR OLD GRANDMOTHER

‘I said, who’s there?’ said Dame Baytes. She was in her usual fireside chair, with a book on the little table before her. ‘I know there’s someone there, show yourself.’ Dame Baytes stood up, using her cane to assist her. She was shaking and pale and Myrtle decided that it might be wiser to show herself and have a straightforward confrontation, rather than scare a poor old grandmother half to death. She pushed back the hood of her cloak.

‘A Godmother girl.’ Dame Baytes turned even paler under her bob cap. Then she flushed the colour of a pink carnation, then turned pale again. ‘What do you want?’

‘My apologies for arriving in such a manner,’ said Myrtle, ‘but I could not get in any other way.’

‘Well, you can just turn right around and go back the way you came,’ said Dame Baytes, closing the book before her and turning it upside down, as though to hide the title on the cover.

She was not fast enough to hide it from Myrtle’s quick eye. ‘*Habboo Hexley’s Compendium of Curses and Spells*,’ said Myrtle. ‘Is that not one of the forbidden books?’

‘I haven’t cursed anyone,’ Dame Baytes said.

‘But you would cast spells written by a darkling wizard. Why? Is it because you lost the wand you stole and need some other means of magic?’

Dame Baytes sat back down heavily. ‘That Elftyn fellow is the wand thief,’ she said defensively. ‘He took it.’

‘He took it from you. But you took it from the storeroom at the school.’

A look of fear passed over Dame Baytes' face, and Myrtle knew she had hit the mark again.

'I did not steal it. I only borrowed it.'

'Master Elftyn said the exact same thing. How did you know of the wand being at the school?'

Dame Baytes was silent.

'You may as well tell me. It will all come out.'

'Master Elftyn told me.'

'How did he know?' Myrtle was surprised.

'Your little friend told him. She let it slip.'

'Harriet?'

Dame Baytes did not reply; but it could only have been Harriet.

'So, Master Elftyn heard of the wand being at the school, and spoke to you of it?'

'He knew I had trained as a Godmother. He wanted a charm making up.'

'A love charm. So you made him one?'

'No. I would not do it. But I did lend him a book with directions of how to formulate it. But I said he must cast it himself. He promised to put the wand back as soon as he had activated his charm. I only gave him instructions.'

Myrtle shook her head in disapproval.

'If I had not aided him, he would have gone to a roamer. And that would have been far worse,' Dame Baytes argued. 'Any way, you have the wand back now. If you knew of Master Elftyn having it, then you must have recovered it. So why are you here? What's it to do with me anymore?'

'The wand was destroyed,' said Myrtle. 'We do not have it.'

Dame Baytes looked up sharply. 'So who is casting magic about the village?'

'You mean other than yourself?'

The old lady flinched. 'I've only made a couple of very small spells. Protective ones. I have to protect my family. They look to me. There's no one else to help us. What would you know about being alone and helpless? Mother Goodword should have done something, but she didn't.'

'Have you cast any romantic spells?' was Myrtle's next question. It was almost too much to hope that she could find the thief and the secret engagement in one swoop, but she must try.

Dame Baytes was silent. She folded her arms tightly across her thin chest and leaned back in her chair, turning her face away. Myrtle cast her mind over all the connections to Dame Baytes who might be involved in a romantic match. Of course! It was obvious who the match would be for.

‘Tell me about your granddaughter,’ said Myrtle. ‘What a pleasure it must be to have her with you.’

Dame Baytes glanced warily at her.

Myrtle looked at the gleaming spinet close by. Such a costly new item looked out of place amongst the old-fashioned, shabby furnishings.

‘Someone thinks very highly of your granddaughter to send her such a handsome gift. I hear it was a mystery gift. One might think she had a secret admirer. A rich one. But such a lady as your granddaughter would not entertain such attentions from a man unless they had an understanding. She has been raised to know better than that, I am sure.’

‘How dare you cast any allusion of impropriety upon my granddaughter!’ Dame Baytes’ voice shook, and she gripped the arms of her chair to pull herself upright.

‘She must be engaged, then,’ said Myrtle.

‘Of course she’s engaged,’ snapped Dame Baytes. She slumped back again, realising the admission had been tricked out of her.

‘What do you want, Sister?’ Dame Baytes said with a blend of resentment and resignation in her voice. ‘Are you going to report me to the Council?’

‘I think it is the Faerie Court that will take offence at one of their wands being stolen and misused.’

‘I’m not sorry,’ said Dame Baytes. ‘I did it for Jane. If I had not found the magic and made Jane a match, she would have gone away as a governess, for we cannot afford to keep her.’

‘You didn’t *find* the magic,’ Myrtle reminded her. ‘You stole it. The match was made illegally.’

‘It was a true love match,’ argued Dame Baytes. ‘I did not make them fall in love by charms and spells, I only brought them together, as a Godmother would do. Why didn’t Mother Goodword make Jane a match? My granddaughter is an orphan. The Council is supposed to take special care of orphans. That’s what they told us when I was in Godmothering school.’

‘I understand your granddaughter has been taken very good care of,’ said Myrtle, recalling all she had heard Harriet say of the history of Jane Fairfayce. ‘Was she not raised by a kindly family and given an excellent education and everything she could wish for?’

‘Raised to make a governess if she cannot marry,’ said Dame Baytes bitterly. ‘If the Council would not help her by telling Mother Goodword to make Jane a match, then I had to do it myself.’

‘The Council makes its decisions with knowledge that we don’t always have access to,’ said Myrtle. ‘There must have been a good reason for not matching her at this time. It’s unwise to interfere. All kinds of undesirable results can happen. All kinds of mischief. You must have been taught that in Godmothering school.’

‘I did what I had to do to save my granddaughter. She’s not strong enough for that kind of life. It would kill her.’

‘You must unsay the spell you made over them,’ Myrtle said.

‘Never.’

‘You must. The use of illegal magic is what opened the darkling bridge and started all the trouble that’s come upon the village.’

‘Not anymore!’ Dame Baytes looked triumphant. ‘Not now that *he* has defeated the witch. All the mischief is at an end now.’

‘He?’ said Myrtle, considering that if Dame Baytes had put protections on her home she ought not to be subject to the general bewitchment of thinking Master Charmall the hero of Highbury.

‘Master Charmall,’ said Dame Baytes. The glow of adoration was unmistakable.

If this adoration was not because of the spell, then it was because... ‘Master Charmall is the man,’ said Myrtle slowly. ‘He is your granddaughter’s match.’

Dame Baytes’s thin lips curled in a smile of satisfaction. ‘He will give Jane the life she ought to have. He will save her.’

Myrtle felt as though she could shake the old lady, if she were not an old lady. ‘Madam, do you not understand what’s really going on? You have opened the bridge enabling the witch of the Wild Woods to come into Highbury, who, I can assure you, has not been defeated by Frank Charmall or anyone else, but has cast the whole village under a delusion so she might be free to make her next move.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Furthermore, there are two young people missing, one of them at least has fallen into the clutches of this witch. And thirdly, I was charged by the Green Lady herself to find and break a match that ought not to have been made.’

Myrtle’s eyes were flashing in their full brightness now, for the mention of Rue fired up her indignation against the wilful folly of Dame Baytes.

‘The Green Lady,’ gasped Dame Baytes, shrinking away from Myrtle’s fierce gaze, and putting a hand over her eyes to block out the sight of her.

‘Madam, I charge you by the Green Lady, to un-speak the spell you made that brought your granddaughter and Master Charmall into an untimely engagement, or woe betide all of us, for the witch is coming again and she cannot be defeated while there is illegal magic at work. What have you been using to make your spells? You must have activated some source of magic with the wand. Where is it?’

‘I won’t tell you. I’ve only enough left for one more spell, and I will use it to make sure the wedding comes to pass!’

It was at this moment of high drama that the margool decided either he was bored, or he was too hot in the stuffy room. He began moving around, invisibly, though Myrtle could still discern a faint shimmer of his body by the bond between them. She saw his tail catch the edge of the little table and knock the wizarding spell book to the floor. Dame Baytes gave a yelp of dismay, her hand moving from her eyes to her chest. ‘Is this the Green Lady’s doing?’ she cried.

Myrtle decided it might not be a bad thing to keep silent. The margool swished across the small room to pounce upon a sideboard against the wall where a plate of some kind of pie lay under a napkin. It had to be meat pie, for he soon ate the filling, discarding the pastry on the floor in a heap of crumbs.

‘It’s Midsummer madness!’ cried Dame Baytes. ‘Has it been sent to trouble me? I’m sorry for casting spells and stealing magic, I’ll undo it all if the Green Lady will not send a spirit of mischief upon me, and ruin our house!’

‘Where is the magic?’ Myrtle demanded.

Dame Baytes wailed. The margool was in one of the bedrooms now, and all manner of thumps and bangs could be heard.

‘Make it go away, make it go away!’ cried the old grandmother. ‘I take it all back! Do not take everything apart, poor Jane’s room will be quite

ruined! The magic is not in there – Jane knows nothing of it!’

‘You must un-speak the spell!’

‘I un-speak it! I retract my spell. Any bond I have made between Jane and Master Charmall I undo. There, are you satisfied? Now make the mischievous spirit go away!’

‘Your retraction won’t work without the same magic you used to make it. Where is the magic?’

Dame Baytes wailed again.

‘Seek out the magic, you spirit of mischief, and do not rest until is found!’ Myrtle cried out with as much authority and wrath as she could muster to make the effect a good one.

The margool rushed back into the sitting room at the sound of Myrtle’s voice, and leapt onto the spinet, his clawed feet clanging up and down on the keys.

‘So be it,’ moaned Dame Baytes, ‘you have found it out. It is in the spinet case.’

Myrtle lifted the lid of the instrument and spied the telltale glow of Dust in a glass jar. ‘How did you know how to make this?’ she marvelled, lifting it out and seeing that it was very fine Dust, better than Rue’s coarse mix.

‘I was the best Dust maker of all my class,’ said Dame Baytes mournfully. ‘Yet, I was the only one of my class who did not graduate.’

Dame Baytes looked and sounded so miserable that Myrtle felt a pang of pity for her, but she soon bolstered her resolve by remembering Rue and her current fate. The margool had jumped down from the spinet and was now pulling the cushions off the wooden settle, no doubt to make a nest for himself and take a nap and digest his meat pie, after his little romp.

‘Make it stop,’ moaned Dame Baytes. ‘It’s ruining the whole house.’

‘Un-speak the spell, with the magic.’ Myrtle held out the jar of Dust. Only a goodly pinch was in the jar, and Myrtle sighed inwardly over the thought that all this time there had been Dust available in Highbury. Dust which could have been a great help, but had been hidden away and misused.

‘What did you use as a carrier for the original spell?’ Myrtle asked.

‘Carrier?’ said Dame Baytes with disdain. ‘Do you still rely on carriers? That’s for infants.’

‘What carries the Dust, then?’ said Myrtle in surprise. She had never heard of any other way of making spells with Dust other than by the use of a carrier.

‘Sound is the carrier,’ said Dame Baytes. She took the last pinch of Dust between her fingers and began the undoing-spell in a singsong chant. Each word was spoken with slow distinction, and a mote of Dust was released, one mote per word. Myrtle watched in fascination as the Dust settled on each word, bringing it to life in one quick, bright glow.

‘That is remarkable,’ said Myrtle, when Dame Baytes had finished speaking. ‘The words are actually carried into the air by the Dust itself. So there is no limit to the distance they can carry.’

Dame Baytes gave another look of disdain. ‘There,’ she said, sinking back into her chair, her hands curling around the empty glass jar. ‘It is done. Leave me now and take the mischief spirit with you.’

‘It’s not quite done,’ Myrtle said. ‘The darkling bridge will not close until the thief is brought before the Green Man. That is what Master Woodhouse was charged to do. You must go and confess.’

‘Confess before the Green Man?’ Dame Baytes’ weak eyes widened.

‘Do you recall, Dame Baytes, that in the Faerie calendar, Midsummer is the first day of the year? A day for feasting, but also a day for reckoning past accounts. The fae are very amenable to cancelling out debts of dishonour to those who seek it at Midsummer. I think the timing is in your favour. If you confess now, you have a good chance of being shown mercy.’

There was a long silence.

‘I cannot walk so far as the Faerie Court,’ said Dame Baytes finally.

‘But you can walk as far as Hartfield.’

Dame Baytes flinched. ‘Master Woodhouse is not there. He is on a pleasure party to Donwell. That is where my daughter and granddaughter have gone.’

‘But I warrant he will be at home tomorrow. Master Woodhouse is not one for going from home two days in a row. Tomorrow is the perfect day.’

There was another long pause.

‘I’ll go tomorrow,’ said Dame Baytes wearily. ‘In the morning. As soon as Jane and Hetty have left for their picnic.’

‘Is that a promise? Do you promise by the Green Man and the Green Lady?’

Another long pause. To make a promise in the name of such powers could not be lightly done. It must be made and carried out, or there would be unpleasant consequences.

‘It is. I promise.’

There was a rippling in the air, and Myrtle gave a sigh of relief to feel it. The work was not done yet, but something had shifted. Things had been set in motion.

REPENTANCE & MISERY

‘**H**arriet, why are you wearing that?’ Mistress Woodhouse stared at the leather belt over Harriet’s blue-spotted muslin.

‘To hold up my scabbard,’ said Harriet, as though it were perfectly reasonable to have a scabbard of elven-tooled leather hanging at her side.

‘But why would you want to bring a scabbard to Donwell?’

‘To hold my sword, of course.’ Harriet did not know what else to say. If she tried to explain the purpose of the sword, Mistress Woodhouse would not believe her while she was under the present enchantment. ‘Do take hold of it yourself,’ Harriet said, lifting the sword’s handle. If Mistress Woodhouse would only hold it herself, she would understand.

‘Do not draw it out,’ Mistress Woodhouse said, taking a step back. ‘You must not wave dangerous things about. Take it off, Harriet dear. You cannot pick strawberries with that dragging at your side.’

Fortunately for Harriet, at that moment Mistress Woodhouse’s attention was diverted by the arrival of Mistress and Master Elftyn. Mistress Elftyn was talking very fast, in a voice more loud and shrill than usual, about donkeys and mad men, and calling for something cold to refresh her, and some reviving tonic, and a couch to lie down upon for a minute, for she had barely escaped with her life after being tossed from a crazed beast and set upon by rogue sprites – her hat was absolutely ruined!

While the whole of the party treated Mistress Elftyn’s story as an interesting and entertaining tale of Midsummer madness, Master Knightley listened with gravity. And when Mistress Elftyn recounted seeing a man who looked very like that missing young man – that steward’s son – but in a wild state, braying like a donkey!

Master Knightley called for a horse and said he was setting out to investigate, and they must all enjoy the strawberries while he was gone, and not delay luncheon for one minute if he were not back in time.

This was a very lively and rowdy beginning to the morning, but the conversation soon rallied round to the merits of Master Charmall and his heroism, and everyone expressed their eagerness to see the man of the hour when he arrived.

HARRIET WAS CONCERNED to find that old Dame Baytes had not come with her daughter and granddaughter, but had stayed at home. This might mean that Myrtle would be unable to search the Bayteses' rooms. She kept her senses on alert, and tried to keep Mistress Woodhouse in view at all times, for she would be the target of any wicked plans that might unfold. But she found her attention being diverted by another member of the party: there was something odd about Jane Fairfayce. It was the smell about her. Smell was Harriet's best sense, when she applied it, and she could distinctly smell the scent of roses wreathed about the young woman.

This was not remarkable, for had not clever, far-seeing Mistress Woodhouse foreseen that Maid Fairfayce was pining for love? But the scent burst more strongly whenever a certain young man's name was spoken. Whenever Frank Charmall's name was said aloud, Maid Fairfayce blushed as a summer rose and the smell of love burst into the air like a little fountain.

Was this merely part of the enchantment, Harriet wondered? But no, it could not be. For, while everyone was enamoured of the man in question, it was not a true love. It was merely the glamour of a love. But Maid Fairfayce, she was not bearing only a glamour.

Could it be that Jane Fairfayce was not in love with someone hundreds of miles away, but with someone very near – with Master Frank Charmall?

Harriet watched as Jane Fairfayce's eyes wander continually to the direction of the road beyond the garden gates, as though looking for Frank Charmall's arrival. Could the betrothal which Myrtle was looking for belong to Jane Fairfayce and Frank Charmall?

When Jane got up, extracting herself from the attentions of Mistress Elftyn and saying that she was just going to walk a little way about the grounds, Harriet followed her.

Jane Fairfayce did not walk about the gardens, as she said she would, but went toward the Donwell road, the direction a rider would come from. Harriet wished she had her forgetfulness cloak on, but she had lent it to Myrtle, so she kept behind the line of elm trees bordering the driveway, and held her scabbard, so it would not clank as she walked.

Maid Fairfayce's hopes were not in vain, for there came the sound of hoofbeats, and a glossy black horse cantered up, bearing the figure of Master Charmall.

He drew near to Jane, brought his horse to a standstill, leapt from the saddle and gathered her into his arms.

'Frank, take care, someone might see us,' said Jane, glancing over her shoulder, but she let him kiss her once before she pulled away.

'Dear me,' exclaimed Harriet softly at the sight of the kiss. 'What will Mistress Woodhouse think? We all thought he would marry *her*! Dear me!'

She was about to turn and hurry away, not wishing to be a spectator to a private love scene, but she had only half turned when something rippled through the air, like a shudder of wind. She knew what it meant – something had shifted in the unseen energy in the air. It was not a bad shift; she could tell by the freshness and clarity of it that it was a good shift. Some curse or bad spell had been broken.

She glanced back at the couple in the road, and was startled by the effect that this new shift had made.

It was as if the spell had been directly over or upon them, and they now sprang apart with a cry of surprise. They recovered themselves, but stared at one another, blinking, as though they had emerged out of a dark room into bright sunlight, and were adjusting their vision.

'What happened?' Master Charmall said. His companion shook her head and took a step away from him. He stretched out a hand for her, but she moved out of reach. 'What's wrong?' he asked.

'I... I don't know,' she stammered. 'Only... it's as though I've just woken from a dream. An impossible dream, Frank. *We* – you and me – *we* are the impossible dream. I see it now!'

'What are you talking about, my darling? Come here, why are you pulling away? It's me – your own Frank.'

But Jane Fairfayce was shaking her head and retreating from him. 'I cannot do this, Frank. This secrecy, this deception. I cannot bear it. It is

living a lie to everyone around us. Your aunt will never accept me, and we shall linger in this state forever, or until...'

'Until what, Jane? What are you saying?'

'Until you are persuaded to marry someone else. Someone your aunt will approve. And I shall have waited and waited all in vain!'

She hurried past him and away down the road.

'Jane! Come back!'

'It's over, Frank!' she called back. 'I see now that it was not meant to be. This has been a delusion, a dream, a madness! I cannot go on.'

'Where are you going?'

'Home.'

'I will walk with you.'

'No! We cannot be seen together. Do not compromise me any further!'

'But to walk so far alone! Please, I beg you, come to the manor with me, out of the heat, it is this dreadful weather that is causing you to act in this way.'

'It is not the weather! And I will walk home alone. Leave me, Frank. Unless you can be free to openly court me, this is all in vain. It is over.' And she broke into a sob and ran, leaving him standing in the road staring after her. He looked upwards and gave a dreadful groan that made Harriet feel a rush of pity for him. A black crow in the tree above Frank Charmall made a loud, cawing back, as though it were laughing at him and his anguished cry.



'Do you think the Green Man will be very angry tomorrow?' Master Woodhouse asked his daughter. They were travelling home in the carriage. Emma was looking out at the afternoon sky, pleased to see that it remained clear. She wanted no rain clouds to threaten tomorrow's outing to Pucks Hill. Ever since that strange shaking of the air earlier in the day, the sun had seemed less fierce, more as it ought to be in temperate Highbury in June. She had not had a chance to talk with Master Knightley, to ask him what he thought the shaking in the air had been, he had been occupied with all that business about the donkey and the possible sighting of poor Benjamin Larkins. It was a pity he did not find him.

‘I do not think he will be angry with you, Papa,’ said Emma. ‘It is Midsummer Day tomorrow, the most joyful day of the year.’

‘Midsummer Day is the day of reckoning, my dear. We have not done as he bid last time he spoke. We have not found the thief. And there was that awful, dreadful business with the witch trying to get into the tower. Such a shocking thing to have happened to you.’

‘Now, Papa, do not dwell on that or you will feel unwell again. The Green Man kept us safe, did he not? Surely he sent Master Charmall to us to be his instrument of rescue.’

Emma had felt a little dimming of her admiration for Frank Charmall that afternoon. She could not say when it had begun; it might be traced back to the sudden shift in the air she had felt, or it might have been due to Frank being in a black humour when he finally arrived at the party. She did so dislike a surly temper. People ought always to check their unpleasant moods. She never sulked in public and dampened other people’s pleasure. It was not the ladylike or gentlemanly thing to do. Master Charmall had dropped a notch in her estimation that day. He would have to do better tomorrow to regain it.

‘He will be so angry that the witch was able to get into Highbury,’ her father continued. ‘He will say I have failed in my duty as Guardian.’

Emma could not easily talk her father’s fears away on this occasion, for there was truth in what he said.

‘I shall be back before sunset, Papa, and we will go together to the Green Man.’

‘I wish you were not going out all day tomorrow. Must you go so far from home on such a day?’

‘My dear Papa, you know that Master Weston has arranged everything and would be disappointed if I did not go. I shall be back long before sunset.’

Emma was in two minds about how much she was looking forward to the next day’s outing. She had been delighted at the idea when Master Knightley first suggested it, and Master Weston had been happy to take up all the arrangements, but then he would go and invite Mistress Elftyn to join their party. She could not like Mistress Elftyn no matter how hard she tried, and she was not much inclined to try very hard.

‘What was all the talk and bustle of this morning when Mistress Elftyn arrived at Donwell? I could not understand what it was all about.’

‘Oh, nothing that signified much, Papa. Mistress Elftyn had set out on the Coles’ donkey, and it had thrown her off and run away.’

‘Why will people do such unwise things, such as ride donkeys?’ said Master Woodhouse. ‘Why did they not come in a carriage? I do not hold with riding donkeys. I knew a young lady who was bitten by a donkey. It is not wise to ride something that can bite. Better sit in a carriage.’

‘Indeed, Papa.’

‘But why did Master Knightley rush out so? What cared he for finding Mistress Cole’s donkey? I was quite confused.’

‘He was not looking for the donkey, Papa. The Elftyns gave a very odd account of having seen Master Knightley’s servant in Green Lane – the steward’s son, Benjamin Larkins.’

‘The young man who disappeared last winter?’

‘The very one. Master Knightley took two of his men with him to investigate this claim, but they came back saying that they could find no stray donkey nor the young man, and the ground was too hard and dusty to show any foot or hoof prints they might follow. It was concluded that the young man could not possibly be young Ben Larkins, he must have simply looked a little like him from a distance.’

‘How very strange. What an odd thing to have happened. But sometimes I fancy that I see you coming across the garden, my dear, and when you come nearer, it is not you at all, it is only one of the white statuary or a young tree.’

‘You really must wear your spectacles when you walk out, Papa.’

‘I hope the young man that was seen was not another roamer or gypsy!’

‘No indeed,’ Emma reassured him. ‘Most likely he was a passing peddler, and as for the donkey, the Coles have often been heard to disclaim it as a badly behaved creature, therefore there was nothing so peculiar about it running off as it did.’

Emma had some sympathy with the poor creature, having to bear Mistress Elftyn of all people. Probably she espoused her own virtues to it too long and loud.

‘I did not like the way Mistress Elftyn talked so loudly for so long, my dear. I am sorry to say it, for I would never wish to speak badly of anyone, least of all a lady, and especially a new bride, but she does talk so loudly when she ought to listen to *you*, Emma. You told her that the donkey was

known to be a difficult creature, but she did not listen. People ought always to listen to you, for you always know best.'

Emma only smiled and patted her father's hand. He lapsed into meditative silence, and she did likewise, going over the day in her mind and the behaviour of all the persons present.

Harriet had been very strange, walking about with that ridiculous sword at her side, and Master Charmall had been a bad-tempered bear. Mistress Baytes had been distressed to find that her niece had walked home without notice, and quite alone in the heat of the day. What a riddle Jane Fairfayce was. She could have returned to her sensible, kindly friends at any time in the past months, and yet she actually chose to remain in Highbury, shut up in those poky little rooms with such an aunt. Either Jane Fairfayce had the patience of an ancient oak sylph, or she was inflicting some penance upon herself to stay so long in Highbury. Emma was inclined to think it must be the latter. She was still very much taken with her own fancy regarding Jane's illicit love affair. It explained everything – the pale looks, the poor appetite that her aunt lamented over, the self-imposed exile from her friends, and to add to all these trials, Mistress Elftyn had taken a liking to her and made quite a pet of her. Poor Jane. Why did she suffer it? What an enigma she was.

All in all, it had been a pleasant day, despite the little vexations of other people's tempers and whims, and the sudden shift in the air boded well, she was sure of it. She did not feel as happy as she had done that morning when she set out for Donwell; everyone seemed less cheerful since the shift in the air. If only she could keep her father from brooding all evening, all would be well. She did share in her father's concern regarding the Green Man; would he be angry that the thief had not been found? What might be the consequences? Might her father be stripped of his position as Guardian? Might they be reduced in rank? That was a sobering thought. She would no longer be Lady Bountiful, daughter of the Wild Man Guardian. A very disagreeable thought indeed.

A HUNDRED DIFFERENT WAYS OF BEING IN
LOVE

Frank was utterly miserable as he left his horse at the stables and walked listlessly towards Randalls. He was expecting another angry note from his aunt, demanding to know why he had not made the proposal to Mistress Woodhouse, but it was worse than that.

The Bridge. Immediately.

He stared at the words, crouching like black spiders on the scrap of note. He wanted to ignore them, cast them away, burn them. Forget that he had an unkind aunt who would divide him forever from the woman he loved. Even as these thoughts and feelings coursed through him, something crawled across the note. He dropped it, thinking there really were spiders scuttling across the paper, but as it lay on the ground at his feet, he saw that there were new words forming beneath the existing three.

Or the fair-o-face girl gets it!

‘Don’t you dare hurt her!’ he yelled, and the cord about his neck tightened and choked any further words from him. He fell to his knees and the choking eased, leaving him gasping for breath. The crow behind him shrieked with croaky laughter. Frank got to his feet. ‘I’m coming,’ he rasped, his throat sore from the cruel cord. The crow squawked and flew ahead.

HIS AUNT WAS BRIMMING with wrath. She was in her usual form, thankfully, and not the hideous old hag body. He could not bear to look at warts and black teeth. And yet, there was something diminished about her.

‘Why have you failed me?’ she demanded. ‘Why did you not make the engagement?’

Frank did not answer. But she cracked him on the shoulder with the carved stick she carried. A stick that became a broomstick when she altered her form.

‘I didn’t get a chance to talk alone with her,’ said Frank sullenly. ‘There were people around us every minute.’

‘And you cannot suggest a little walk alone?’ Another sharp poke on his shoulder with the stick.

‘There’s still tomorrow,’ said Frank. ‘You said your spell would hold till Midsummer Night.’

‘It’s been weakened. Something has happened. Something to do with you and that fair-o-face girl. Did you think I didn’t know?’

She was directly in front of him now, moving in that sudden way of hers that could carry her from one side of the room to another, seemingly in the space of one step.

‘Did you think I didn’t know that you had yourself a little sweetheart? Did you think it was a great secret? You fool. Now do what you were sent here to do and do it quickly. I need the engagement made by noon tomorrow. My spell will not hold much longer.’

Frank felt a flicker of hope. If his aunt’s spell had been weakened by something – something to do with that shift he had felt – then there might be a chance of her plan failing.

‘Don’t try to thwart me,’ said his aunt in a low voice. ‘If this spell weakens any more, I will make another soon enough. But if you betray me, boy, I will not take vengeance on you.’

Frank lifted his eyes to meet hers. His aunt always said the worst things in her quiet voice. At times like this, he preferred her shrill insults.

‘I will take vengeance on the fair-o-face girl. And she will suffer all the days of her life.’

Frank shivered.

‘Take this.’ Something was tossed at him. A small bag fell to the ground by his foot. ‘Extra charms. You’ll need them to make up for this weakening of my spell. Go on, take them,’ she snapped when he did not move.

Slowly, involuntarily, he bent down, taking up the bag. Inside were three objects: a twist of paper, a disk of metal with a spell scratched onto it in the form of a symbol, and a golden ring.

‘What are they?’

‘Dust from the six-league path, use it to whisk the ninny away from everyone to make your proposal. A charm to force the binding words, and a ring to seal the promise. Once that ring’s on her finger, there’s no going back.’

Frank looked gloomily at the trio of darkling charms.

‘Cheer up, boy. You shan’t be jilted or made a coxcomb out of with these to aid you.’

‘I would sooner gain a wife by true means,’ murmured Frank, sliding the vile objects back into the bag and shoving it into his pocket.

‘Marriage is like any other promise. It’s trading one thing for another to get what you want.’

‘Marriage is about being with the one you love.’

‘Don’t start with your beef-brained nonsense. Love won’t get you anything but empty pockets and a brood of snivelling brats. You’ll be the richest man in the kingdom when my plans come to pass. What’s the matter with you? Money is power in this kingdom, and we shall have power in both by this match. That pox-ridden Fairy Council ought to make me an honorary Godmother, I can matchmake better than any of them.’

She gave him one more poke of her stick before turning back into the dark woods. ‘By noon tomorrow. I want word of her binding by then. Or the fair-o-face gets it.’



MASTER KNIGHTLEY HAD BEEN FRUSTRATED by his search for Ben Larkins ending in disappointment. For the second time, his dog had picked up a scent which ended in a dead-end in the grounds of Mother Goodword’s school, in a bare patch of grass where there was nothing to be seen or found.

The picnic party was something of an ordeal, for everyone was still under the influence of the spell, though there had been a seismic shift in the air that seemed to bring people a little more to their senses, though not fully. He wondered what the cause of it was, and wished the Godmother girl would show herself, that he might ask if it were anything to do with her.

After his guests had left, he determined to walk round the school grounds once more; it was futile, no doubt, but he could not give up on finding Ben, not when he had been seen twice in the past two days. He would walk round the boundaries of the village first, checking for anything amiss. It would make his walk a long one, which was desirable to him in his present state.

So he set off in the early summer evening with his stout shoes on his feet, his sword at his side, his walking stick in his hand, and Quince at his heels.

He stopped at the river first, to examine the darkling bridge. It had grown fainter. Perhaps the shift in the air earlier that day had something to do with weakening it. It was now a wraith-like bridge, ghostly and wispy in the setting sun. If only it were gone altogether, and the fingers of darkling magic cut off from the border.

He turned from the river and walked along the edge of the meadows, which were glimmering in the falling dusk as the meadow sprites gathered together for their Midsummer Eve dancing. The fae would be celebrating from sunset tonight until the end of Midsummer Night, the most important night of their year.

Master Knightley was not the only man walking the meadows that evening. Someone else was up ahead of him, and for a moment he thought it might be Ben Larkins. But as he quickened his pace to gain on the walker, he could see that it was not.

‘Is that you, Robert?’ he called out.

Robert Martin turned around. ‘Evening, Master Knightley. And a rare evening it is.’

Robert nodded at the sky and Master Knightley was struck for the first time by how beautiful a night it was. He had been so deep in thought, he had not noticed the perfect rainbow of colour the sky displayed, with the Midsummer moon rising above the horizon and the evening star so bright it was like a little sun.

‘What brings you out tramping the fields?’ Master Knightley enquired, falling in beside Robert.

‘I’ve been plucking up courage to carry these over to the school,’ said Robert, holding up a bunch of flowers. Anemones, wild roses, meadowsweet, and a single orchid were in his hand.

‘That’s a rare orchid,’ Master Knightley noted. ‘I forget its real name, but the folk name is *Love’s Hope*, or *Love’s Dream*, or something like it, if I remember right.’

‘*Love’s Wish*,’ said Robert. ‘Finding such a flower on such a night seems like a sign, like a Faerie gift.’

‘A sign because it is Midsummer?’

‘Because it’s her birthday.’

Master Knightley did not need to ask who *her* was a reference to. ‘You should take them to her,’ he encouraged, feeling that the loss of the woman one loved was too painful a thing to allow to happen without a fight. He could not fight for Emma, for she had given her heart to another, but Harriet Smith was still free. ‘Go on. Go directly.’

‘I want to, but... I don’t want to push myself on her notice if she does not wish it. Besides, I think she is mostly alone at the school now. It wouldn’t be right to call on her when she might be unchaperoned.’

‘Then write a note and leave it with the flowers.’

‘I have done so already.’ Robert held up a neatly folded note. ‘But I have walked and thought and thought some more and decided perhaps I ought not to go.’

They had reached the hedgerow bordering Donwell road. A stile would take them into the road; from thence Mill Farm was to the north and Highbury to the southwest. They climbed the stile and paused a moment in the road.

‘I’ll walk with you as far as the school,’ Master Knightley offered. ‘I’m going that way.’

Robert Martin hesitated, but finally he shook his head. ‘I must respect her wishes. She refused me.’

‘I believe she was persuaded into writing that refusal, Robert.’

‘That may be. Elizabeth says the same. But even so...’

An impulse seized Master Knightley, and he snatched up the flowers and the note. ‘If Midsummer Eve is not the night for chancing one’s luck in love, what night is? I’ll drop them round to the school for you. Life and love pass by too quickly, Robert. I have ten years more experience than you to have gained that knowledge. If you don’t act now, you’ll end up an old bachelor like me for the rest of your days.’ And he strode away down the road, feeling that if he could not win the woman he loved, at least he could

make a bid on Robert's behalf. It was not like him to do such a thing – but what did one expect at Midsummer?



HARRIET FOUND Myrtle waiting for her in the bee garden. It was hard for Harriet to tell whether Myrtle's visit to the Baytes house had yielded anything useful or not, for Myrtle's expression was her usual cool one. But as Harriet drew near, she saw the bright flash of Myrtle's blue eyes and knew that Myrtle was pleased about something.

'What did you find?' Harriet hurried through the little wicket gate into the garden. She bumped into something with her knee and yelped.

'Sorry,' said Myrtle, 'I forgot to take his cloak off.' She untied the cloak from the margool; his head was silvery as it stretched towards Harriet's sword.

'Did you find anything? Old Dame Baytes didn't come to Donwell. Was she at home?'

'She was. And we had a very interesting conversation.'

'Tell me all! Something odd happened to her granddaughter – can you believe it – Jane Fairfayce is, or was, engaged to Frank Charmall! I was so amazed – I thought Master Charmall loved Mistress Woodhouse!'

'*Was* engaged?' said Myrtle, 'They have broken it off?'

'Yes. I saw it all. It was very sad. Very romantic, but horribly sad. They do make a very nice-looking couple, now that I have seen them together. I only wonder that I never noticed it before.'

'This is just what I hoped for,' said Myrtle. 'The engagement that was to be stopped has been stopped. I've fulfilled the Green Lady's instructions.'

'Will Rue be free now?' Harriet clasped her hands tightly together.

'I hope so. I wish I understood how the ways of Faerie worked, they're certainly not straightforward. But there is more – I've found out who the wand thief is?'

'Who?' gasped Harriet. 'Not Jane Fairfayce? Not Frank Charmall? Who could it be?'

'Dame Baytes.'

Harriet was astonished. Her mouth hung open. 'I never would have suspected *her*. What possible reason would she have for stealing Mother

Goodword's wand?'

'Matchmaking reasons.' said Myrtle.

Harriet's eyes widened, 'Of course! She wanted to matchmake her granddaughter. So she matched her with Frank Charmall, and because it was a match made with stolen magic, it had to be broken! It all makes sense now! And now the bridge will close again, and the trouble will stop, and Rue will be free – but how will she get home again once the bridge has closed?'

Myrtle's brows were drawn into a frown before Harriet had reached this concluding thought. It was a concern that Myrtle had herself. How would Rue make it home once she was released from the witch if the bridge was gone?

'There is the door into Faerie at Hartfield,' Myrtle said. 'That is the only way I can think of that Rue might come through. My hope is that the Green Lady will help her. It's so frustrating not knowing what to do or how to help her get home. I've fulfilled my promise, so I must trust that all will be put right now.'

'Mistress Elftyn said she saw Ben Larkins in Green Lane,' Harriet said. 'But Master Knightley went out looking for him, and took some of his men with him, but none of them could find him. Poor Ben. Shall we go to Mill Farm and see if that Master Smith has been turned back?'

'I've already been. It was the first thing I thought of when I left Dame Baytes.'

'But he's still a frog,' said Harriet, judging by Myrtle's grave expression that she had not found Master Smith restored.

'He's still a frog.'

'So the curse has not been broken. It's all very confusing.'

'Dame Baytes has yet to confess her theft to Master Woodhouse,' said Myrtle. 'She goes in the morning to do so. My hope is that her confession will be the final act to break the curse.'

'Oh, I do hope so! That would be the best birthday ever!'

'I forgot it was your birthday,' said Myrtle.

Harriet only sighed, not saying aloud that it felt simply awful to have no children, no Mother Goodword, none of her friends about her to celebrate. There would be no cake, no magic-mead, as the little girls called it: the sparkly, honey-tasting drink that Busie made for the Midsummer feast.

Even Mistress Woodhouse had forgotten it was her birthday, so addled were her thoughts with the enchantment she was under.

‘We’ll celebrate doubly when Rue and Mother Goodword get back,’ Myrtle promised. Harriet nodded and made a brave smile.

‘I’d better go,’ said Myrtle, seeing that the margool was showing too much interest in the beehives. An inquisitive margool and a swarm of angry bees did not bode well.

‘I think I should go with Mistress Woodhouse to Puck’s Hill tomorrow,’ said Harriet, following Myrtle out of the wicket gate. ‘To watch over her.’

‘Don’t forget your sword,’ said Myrtle, tying the cloak back onto the wriggling margool. ‘I don’t think the spell will follow you out of Highbury, but there’s no saying what might happen on Midsummer Day at such a place as Puck’s Hill.’

‘What will you do tomorrow?’ Harriet asked.

‘I’ll be watching the bridge. I’ll know when Dame Baytes has done what she’s promised when I see the bridge disappear. Then I’ll check on Master Smith.’

HARRIET WATCHED Myrtle walk away down the drive. She felt subdued. She ought to be glad, she told herself. The thief had been discovered, and Myrtle’s task to break an engagement made by bad magic had been completed. Surely everything would soon be put to rights again. But the odd, sad feeling persisted. It was something to do with her birthday going unnoticed, something about the way it showed her that she was quite alone in the world, without a family, especially now Mother Goodword was gone and none of her friends at school remained. It must be wonderful to feel you really belonged to people. Mistress Woodhouse belonged to her father and her sister and her sister’s children, and had lifelong friends about her, such as Mistress Weston and Master Knightley. All Harriet’s friends went away when they graduated from school. Mistress Woodhouse was the dearest friend she had ever had, but Mistress Woodhouse was not herself at present, with the influence of the spell upon her.

She paused outside to look up at the copper fox. He was still verdigris, and he was not happy about it. There was no sly smile on his face these days. ‘I hope you’ll be coppery again soon,’ she called up to him.

She passed into the school entrance, and paused before the carving of the Green Lady on the wall.

The Green Lady was so beautiful, especially at this time of the year, when England was very green. Harriet stood admiring her long flow of hair, like a smooth fall of water, and her face, which was both very young and very wise all at the same time.

‘Sister Myrtle has done what you asked of her,’ Harriet told the Green Lady. She thought she saw the carving blink her oaken eyes. She watched intently. Either she was imagining things, or the Green Lady’s head just shook slowly from side to side.

‘But she did,’ Harriet insisted. ‘She broke off the engagement made by stolen magic.’ Why was the Green Lady shaking her head? Why did she look so grave? The movement ceased, and the carving resumed its solidity. Something warm and soft wrapped around Harriet’s ankle. Cloe-Claws had come silently in and wound her tail around her leg and purred a message. ‘All right, I’m coming,’ Harriet said. ‘Not that I’m much hungry for my supper, I ate too many strawberries and cream today.’

HARRIET WENT TO BED EARLY, feeling tired after a day of watching and thinking and bending over strawberry beds in the hot sun. Tomorrow would be another busy day, so she would get an early night. She was brushing out her hair at her dressing table when she heard a rapping at the front door below. She opened her window and looked out.

‘Who’s there!’ she called down.

‘Ah, Maid Smith, just the person I was looking for.’

‘Oh! It is you, Master Knightley.’

Why would Master Knightley be calling upon her at such an hour?

‘Is Sister Myrtle well?’ Harriet called down, recalling that Myrtle should be at Donwell at this hour.

‘All is well,’ Master Knightley called up. ‘Do not be anxious.’

‘I’ll come down directly.’

‘No need to hurry down. I have something to deliver, but I shall lay it down on the step here and be on my way. Greetings of the day to you, Maid Smith!’

And he turned and was gone, but he had left something. What could it be? Perhaps he bore a message from Mistress Woodhouse. There must be

some good reason for this unusual visit.

Harriet ran downstairs to the hall and unlocked the door. On the step lay a little posy of flowers. A beautiful little posy of anemones and meadowsweet, and a very pretty and unusual orchid flower in the centre. She caught up the flowers with a little cry of happiness. He had found out it was her birthday! He had brought her flowers! Why would he bring her flowers? A man did not bring a maid flowers unless... 'unless he cares for her,' Harriet whispered. Did Master Knightley care for her? Could such a man care for such a girl as herself? It seemed too wonderful. Too amazing. Master Knightley, handsome, clever, and rich, who could choose almost any lady he liked, could it be that he liked *her*? Did not Mistress Woodhouse say that wonderful things do happen at Midsummer?

Flowers had great meaning. Harriet ran to the library. 'Ferne,' she called to the fern sprite. 'Please find me a book that will tell me the meaning of flowers!'

Ferne flew to the 'D' section and alighted on *A Dictionary of Flower Meanings*. Turning the pages with a giddy feeling, Harriet found the rare flower she was seeking under the chapter on orchids.

'Oh!' cried Harriet, feeling she would burst with the surprise of it all. '*Love's Wish!* The orchid is called *Love's Wish!*'

Before Harriet went to sleep that night, she took up three anemones and laid them under her pillow for the Midsummer Eve tradition. She would not lay the orchid there, for it was far too precious to crush.

'*Love's Wish,*' she whispered to herself again and again, wanting it to seep into her dreams. All the loneliness of her unremembered birthday melted away in the warmth of knowing that someone loved her. Someone good and handsome, a gentleman above all gentlemen. It was all rather confusing, however, for he was supposed to be her ward. He was not supposed to fall in love with her. Or... could it be that *she* was his match? That would explain why she had not been able to match him with anyone else. It was all most puzzling. What a riddle this matchmaking business was. She did not understand it at all. And the biggest puzzle of it all, was – did she love him back? She could hardly say. She was flattered. She was honoured. She had never been so surprised in her life, and certainly she would not be able to look him in the face at the picnic tomorrow without a blush. But did she love him?

She would know in the morning. The flowers under her pillow on Midsummer Eve would cause her to dream of her true love. Or so it was said.

Love's Wish. And she fell asleep and dreamt unaccountably of Robert Martin.

OLD STORIES

Midsummer Day dawned bright with a sky the colour of forget-me-nots. The fae of Highbury had gathered their flowers while the dew was still on them and woven their wreaths and garlands to hang on their doors. The children of the village were busy running back and forth to the outskirts of Gypsy Woods to gather sticks, bringing armfuls to throw onto the village bonfire that would be lit at sunset. Every lantern was polished, every wick trimmed, new candles, saved especially for the evening's festivities, were set in place, ready to be lit at dusk when the dancing would begin.

One resident was not in the mood for Midsummer dancing, nor for picnicking on hilltops. Master Knightley had made his usual early breakfast and was now in the library poring over the history Sister Myrtle had found. He didn't look up when Myrtle came in, but said, as she drew near, 'Did you read much of this?'

'The first few pages,' she replied. 'I spent more time looking at the sorceress's book.'

Master Knightley grimaced and glanced at the book in question. It was wrapped up in its leather covering; even the sight of that black, spiky handwriting was like looking at a page covered in creeping things. 'What were my ancestors thinking of, stealing it and bringing it over the border?'

'It appears to be a record of her deepest workings,' said Myrtle. 'I only wish there was someone who could help me decipher it.' The darkling magic was a malevolent murmuring and muttering to her senses.

There was a rap at the door and a footman announced that the carriage had been sent on to the Bayteses and the master's horse was saddled and

awaiting him. The footman held out his master's riding hat and crop.

'Put those on the table. Tell the groom I'll be down directly,' Master Knightley said. 'What madness made me suggest this foolish outing?' He pushed away the manuscript. 'Pucks Hill on Midsummer Day. I was certainly bewitched to suggest such a thing.' He stood up and adjusted his sword. 'What shall you do this day?' he asked.

'My first task shall be to ensure that Dame Baytes makes her promised visit this morning.'

'Dame Baytes,' Master Knightley marvelled. 'The last person in Highbury I would have suspected.'

'It should make a significant difference, should it not? The Green Man will close the bridge once the thief has confessed. The magic can be reversed.'

'I certainly hope so.'

Myrtle frowned. 'Sometimes it feels as though one is fighting against shadows in trying to find a way through things of magic,' she said. 'I could almost wish I had chosen to be a scribe or scholar or something more logical than studying the ways of Godmothering. I may yet have to choose another way,' she finished despondently. 'For I have little hope of graduating after all the troubles.'

'Something tells me that you will have a hard time keeping away from the ways of magic,' said Master Knightley. 'Ever since you came out of Faerie, you have something of green magic about you. You are not quite like other young ladies, if I may be so blunt. And your companion happens to be some rare creature that has never been seen in this kingdom. I'm sorry, Sister Myrtle, but I do not think you will ever lead an ordinary life.'

'But if I am supposed to be on this path,' she said, 'why is it so hard? Why do I feel as though I'm groping in the dark to find pieces of a puzzle to put together? A real Godmother would know what to do.'

'Perhaps it is a test. You can only do the next step you've been given. You say you had a directive from the Green Lady.'

'Which I've completed. She told me to break an engagement made by illegal magic before Midsummer Night, and I have done so. But Rue and Ben are not returned, and Master Smith is not recovered.'

'Who is this Master Smith? I don't know of a Master Smith in Highbury.'

‘An unfortunate young man passing through who got caught up in Rue’s bad magic.’

‘I see. Unfortunate indeed. I hope he does not have a grieving set of parents at home such as poor Larkins does.’

He took up his riding hat from the table and placed it firmly onto his head. ‘There’s an interesting passage in that history book,’ he said in parting. ‘I read it this morning. I think it may relate to the sorceress. See what you think.’

Myrtle pulled the manuscript towards her.

‘Beginning at this page,’ said Master Knightley, leaning over to point it out before taking up his gloves. ‘It’s will be a wretchedly hot ride,’ he complained.

Myrtle, being an exceptionally quick reader, had scanned the first paragraph by the time he had put on his gloves and adjusted his cuffs.

‘It says that the sorceress rose to power and began evolving her dark works two centuries ago,’ said Myrtle, tracing the close-written lines with her finger.

‘She began life as one Maid C–, the only daughter of Sir C– knight to the royal court of Faerie. This Maid C– had a fae father and a mortal mother, and they lived on an estate known as Ease-Comely. But Sir C– was mortally wounded in the second Dragon War, and it was thought by his wife and near-grown daughter that he was treated badly by the court, who confiscated a large portion of his estate after his death and stripped him of his rank and honours.’

‘That does sound like poor treatment,’ said Myrtle, lifting her head from the page, ‘if it happened that way.’

Master Knightley took up his riding crop. ‘On the next page it says that the court claimed he had been profiteering by stealing from the queen’s own treasuries of charms and selling them on. That was the reason for recouping money from his estate and stripping him of his rank. The queen is known for upholding law and justice. Faerie has prospered well during her reign, I understand, so I would reckon the charges to be true.’

‘I wonder why their full name is not written,’ said Myrtle. ‘What does ‘C’ stand for?’

‘I wondered the same thing myself,’ said Master Knightley. ‘And if I did not feel obligated to watch over Mistress Woodhouse’s welfare this day, I would certainly stay home and see if I could find it out.’

‘If it’s here, I’ll find it,’ Myrtle promised.

‘Excellent.’ Master Knightley tapped the top of his boots with his crop and left the room with a nod of farewell.



‘NOW PAPA, the carriage is ready so I will be going.’

Master Woodhouse trembled at this news.

‘Must you go, Emma? It is such a long way.’

‘Now, Papa, we talked this all through last night. It is not so very far. James is driving, and you know how careful he is. All our good friends will be there, Master Knightley and Master Weston included, they will not see any harm come to me.’

‘But there are so many sprites on Pucks Hill. And they are not nice sprites, as we have, they are quite wild. They will be wild as can be on this day. And there are other things on Pucks Hill. Old things. It is a very old place.’

‘They will not show themselves before sunset, Papa. And we shall be home long before then. We shall set out something pleasant for them to eat, in case they do come and look at us, that will keep them in good humour. Serle has made an extra-large honey cake especially for putting out for them. I am still Lady Bountiful, even so far as Pucks Hill, Papa. No sprite or anything else shall trouble us.’

The mention of cake was not a good subject to raise.

‘Master Weston likes to eat rather too much,’ said Master Woodhouse. ‘And he is always encouraging people to do the same. I heard talk of pigeon pie. I once heard of a whole family being poisoned by a bad pigeon pie.’

‘Then I shall not eat the pigeon pie, Papa.’

‘And it is so hot. You will get sunburned.’

‘I shall carry my shade with me at all times, Papa, you may be sure of that. I have no desire for freckles.’

‘But to go out walking in midday sun on Midsummer. It would be better to leave such an excursion until early autumn, when it has cooled a little, or next spring. Late spring, when it has warmed up again, if it be not a wet spring, for then it will be too muddy for walking. My dear, I really think you ought to wait until spring.’

‘My dear Papa, summer is of all the seasons the very best for such an excursion. And we shall not be out of doors for long. We shall have a pleasant drive and a light lunch and a nice walk, and then we shall all come home again.’

‘But why can you not do all of that from here? A pleasant drive to Randalls, and a short walk and home for a light lunch. You might even eat the lunch outside, if you must have a picnic, though I do not advise it. The ants, you know.’

‘Papa, that is what I do almost every day. The purpose of an excursion is to go somewhere new. That is the pleasure of it, to see and walk in a new landscape. It is refreshing to do something new now and again. And I have never been beyond Highbury.’

‘It would be good if you still did not go out of Highbury.’

‘Papa, the witch is gone.’

‘But there are other dangers. I never wish for anything new,’ said Master Woodhouse with the confusion of a child who has been told that some people actually like to eat boiled cabbage.

‘One half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other, as the saying goes, Papa.’

Her father sighed, feeling trounced by the wisdom of a saying. He must make do with limiting the damage if he could not stop it altogether. ‘You will take care to have a very light lunch, my dear, and only eat what Serle has cooked? You will not eat any of Mistress Elftyn’s pigeon pie or Master Weston’s cake? You must not be walking about after eating rich things like cake. Or cheese.’

‘I shall eat Serle’s excellent boiled ham and eggs, Papa, and I daresay some of Master Knightley’s strawberries. You always say Master Knightley’s strawberries are very healthful. You find them quite refreshing.’

‘A few. A very few. But they must not be eaten with cream. Cream is too rich. It is a very shocking habit, this eating strawberries with cream. Some people even put *sugar* on them.’

‘Then I shall be sure not to eat mine with cream. Ah, here is Harriet coming, but no, it is not Harriet.’

‘Who is it, my dear? Who can it be? All our friends are going on this terrible, hot excursion.’

‘It is Dame Baytes. Fancy her walking all this way. Now you will have your dear old friend Dame Baytes to sit with you and take tea. You will like

that.'

Emma was glad of the diversion that Dame Baytes's arrival created, and made great use of it, settling their visitor down near Master Woodhouse and calling for tea. If Dame Baytes seemed a little flustered and ill at ease, Emma accounted for it by the novelty of her walking out so far alone.

Harriet had now arrived, and Emma made her farewells and one final round of promises to her father not to fall asleep in the sun and to take care that no wasps or dirt got into her luncheon, and to be sure to sit under a shady tree and walk very slowly and not talk and eat at the same time, for many a person had suffered choking in such manner, and absolutely no sitting down within a fairy ring or on a fairy barrow, as if she would be so foolish.



MYRTLE CONTINUED READING, intrigued by this account of an embittered young woman, whose history was important enough to be included in this family history. But there was little else to be learnt. The young woman had inherited her father's estate, which presumably meant the mother had died. There was no record of her marrying, but there were references to the part of the kingdom where she dwelt coming under a shadow. 'A shadow?' mused Myrtle. 'What does that mean? Surely it can only mean that darkling magic arose. Did this lady begin practising dark magic?'

She read to the end of the account, but there was no other clue. It was a waste of an hour's reading. She closed the manuscript, pushing it away with a mounting feeling of frustration at all these dead ends she seemed to be going down. 'Some random account written for some reason that I cannot fathom,' she said irritably. She would serve her time better by seeing if Dame Baytes had made her way to Hartfield yet. She stood up impatiently, but the words '*for some reason*' resounded through her mind.

'They wrote it for some reason,' she said. The margool under the table puffed an orange ball at her; he didn't like it when she was frustrated or irritated.

'What is the connection between this lady and the history of the Knightley's? What is the reason for recording it?'

She turned to the bookshelves lining the room from floor to ceiling along the largest wall. ‘They really need to put their books in alphabetical order rather than size and colour,’ she murmured. It took a vexatious amount of time to find what she was looking for, but finally, and by means of standing on a chair to reach a high shelf, a fat, heavy volume of *The Histories of Heraldries of the Fae Nobility: Vol. xviii* was found and tugged down.

‘He died in the second Dragon War,’ said Myrtle, finding the relevant timeline in the index. There were two full pages listing the heraldic names and symbols of the knights who had fallen, but there were only three beginning with C:

Cleareye, Captain of the Queen’s Archers, title passed to eldest son, Sir Kestrellis Cleareye.

‘He had a son, so it’s not him.’

Churnfast, Master of the Queen’s Dairy, title passed to eldest son, Sir Cornelian Churnfast.

‘How did a dairy master end up on the battlefields?’

Charmall, Keeper of the Queen’s Potions, title passed to Sir Quillian Fortune favour. House of Charmall stripped of rank and title and privilege and estate due to fouldome felony. No son to continue the line. In recognition of the late Sir Charmall’s service on the battlefield, the queen’s mercy permits widow and daughter to retain family manor, but lands to be returned to the crown and noble rank and shield revoked.

Myrtle stared at the heraldic shield of the ill-fated Charmall. It was divided into three, the meanings of each part listed in the margins: a star to represent the queen’s favour, a crow to represent watchfulness, and a spotted mushroom beside a pestle and mortar to represent the vocation of a charm-maker.

‘A young lady of the name of Charmall,’ said Myrtle, staring at the shield. ‘A lady full of resentment and bitterness towards the Fair Court, believing them to have defamed her family name and taken away her land, such a person might very well reject the ways of the fair and seek the ways of darkness...’

She paced up and down as ideas and images tumbled out – ideas so bright and certain, that she was quite sure she had aligned her thoughts with the truth.

‘Such a woman might wish to garner power to become a powerful sorceress, able to take over the land to replace that which she believed was wrongly taken from her. And what better way to gain control than to have control over the Doors between Faerie and England.’ Myrtle frowned as she thought hard. ‘Those that guard the Doors hold great stretches of land and authority.’

The margool was watching her with his glowing eyes, his head resting on his front claws.

‘If she were to take a boy child from the village where one of those Doors was situated...’

She continued, looking at the margool as though she were telling him a story.

‘And marry him off to the daughter of the Guardian of the Door – after first cursing him to weaken him and make him unfit as Guardian that there might be a call for a new one which she would supply by her own son—’ Myrtle’s blue eyes blazed as she saw the story unfold, ‘that she might have full legal access to the Door herself, and take over!’

The margool puffed a yellow cloud. A portrait of one of Master Knightley’s fierce ancestors, the Silver Knight, glared down from the wall opposite Myrtle as though such a tale of treachery and cunning were fit to meet his sword.

‘I’ll wager that the story of the witch seeking vengeance for the stolen salad leaves,’ said Myrtle, ‘was just part of the ploy. She didn’t want Mistress Woodhouse, she wanted Hartfield. She wants a legal right to be there, that she might have access to the Door into Faerie and into the Green Man’s Lands, and a place of power in both kingdoms. And the only way she can have a legal right to be there, would be through inheritance or marriage. Is Frank Charmall even her real nephew?’ she wondered. The margool only yawned and close his eyes, and the ancestor on the wall only glared more fiercely.

‘There might be a connection through her mortal mother’s line. But either way, Frank Charmall’s father signed some contract of adoption.’ Suddenly she gasped. The margool’s eyes opened. The ancestor’s face glowed with new light, caused by the sun having risen high enough to cast a glare on the portrait through the window.

‘I have stopped the wrong engagement,’ said Myrtle, her frown clearing as sudden realisation dawned.

The margool cocked his head.

‘Frank Charmall will need to persuade Mistress Woodhouse to marry him if he is to carry out the witch’s plan, if the witch is indeed his aunt. But it will not be a true match, for she will have been charmed, beguiled, bewitched into it. I was charged by the Green Lady to end a betrothal before Midsummer Night, or there would be terrible consequences. He must be making his proposal today. They must not be left alone, not for one minute!’

The margool lifted his head; the ancestor urged decisive action by his fierce glower.

‘How am I going to get to Pucks Hill?’ Myrtle asked the margool and the ancestor? ‘The whole party left an hour ago!’

She looked to the ancestor, noticing for the first time that he was sat astride – ‘A horse! I must commandeer a horse!’ She snatched up the cloaks from the back of her chair. ‘Time for you to spread your wings, Margool, you’ll have to fly to keep up, we have got to stop that marriage proposal!’

AUTHOR OF THE MISCHIEF

‘I am sorry Emma could not stay to pour the tea, Dame Baytes, but she has gone on this outing to Pucks Hill. I must say I think it an unwise thing to be walking about in this heat, but young people do not take care of their health as they ought. They are always rushing about in all weathers and eating all kinds of things without heed.’

Dame Baytes was hardly listening to a word; she was fidgeting on her chair and had not touched the tea which Mistress Hodges had poured for her.

‘When I was a young person,’ Master Woodhouse continued, ‘my grandmother, for I was raised by my grandmother, she would not let me out in the hot sun, for she said that heat attracted dragons. She was of an age to remember the dragons, so she was very mindful of them. She always used to say to me—’

‘Master Woodhouse,’ interrupted Dame Baytes, unable to contain herself any longer. ‘I must tell you something of a grave matter, and I must tell you before the Green Man.’

‘Grave matter? Green Man? But what is this?’ Master Woodhouse had been reaching for his cup, but now he fell back into his chair and stared at Dame Baytes in alarm.

‘Will you take me before the Green Man, Master Woodhouse, before my courage fails me? I promised I would keep my word, and I am weary of the burden of it all, for nothing has come out quite as I thought.’

THE TWO ELDERLY figures trembled before the carving in the Great Hall. Though the Green Man remained in the form of wood, yet there was a subtle movement. Out of the corner of the eye one could see a hart turning its head, a tree branch swaying in the breeze, a swathe of forest flowers nodding gently, a nymph peeking out.

‘Please stand before the Green Man,’ Master Woodhouse began the recitation. ‘He shall judge you meet or no.’

Dame Baytes was quaking with fear as she took a step forward.

‘Do you come with open hands and heart, Dame Baytes?’

‘I do.’

‘Do you come with an eye that looks for good, an ear that listens for truth, a tongue that refrains from evil?’

‘I come with a confession.’

‘A confession?’

‘I confess that I stole something of great value.’

‘Stole, Dame Baytes? But what is this?’

‘I stole Mother Goodword’s wand. I no longer have it, and now I ask for mercy on this day of Midsummer, the day of reckoning. I am very sorry.’ Dame Baytes voice cracked, and her head bowed.

‘Oh my,’ gasped Master Woodhouse, staggering back. ‘You are the thief? How can this be? I can hardly believe my ears. There must be some mistake!’

Dame Baytes shook her head. ‘There is no mistake. I took it to matchmake my granddaughter that she might not have to go away into service. I wanted her to have a rich, handsome husband. I wanted to be her Fairy Godmother.’

‘But to steal another’s magic! Why did you not ask Mother Goodword for assistance in matchmaking, not that I hold with matchmaking, I think it a very disagreeable business. It quite breaks up families.’

‘Mother Goodword said Jane must wait for her appointed time. But time was running out, Master Woodhouse, and poor Jane was so miserable about going away, she really did not wish it, and her health was suffering, she is not strong in health, I had to do something.’

‘But to *steal*.’ Master Woodhouse was so shocked, he had to lean heavily on his cane to support himself, for there were no chairs to sit upon in the Great Hall.

‘It was wrong to steal,’ Dame Baytes said stoutly, as though she had convinced herself of this fact and was determined to keep to it. ‘I have renounced my wrong, though it breaks my heart, for now poor Jane’s match has failed. She came home in such distress yesterday and would not eat, and I do not think she slept a wink. We shall all be heartbroken. May the Green Man show me mercy on this day, for I understand that my wrongdoing opened the darkling bridge.’

‘Oh, I hope that he may! But will he?’

There was a crashing noise, as though a tree had been felled. Master Woodhouse and Dame Baytes both cried out and moved away from the wall as it rippled and moved. Tree leaves rustled, birds called out, the sound of singing and pipes playing were heard from the wood beyond.

‘Come,’ ordered the Green Man, his deep voice resounding round the Great Hall, causing the air to shimmer with magic. Where there had been a carving of a tree trunk there was now a door. Beyond the opening, the smell and light of ancient woodland glowed.

‘We must do as he says,’ Dame Baytes urged. She trembled violently, but she resolutely set her face to the door and moved forward, holding out a hand to Master Woodhouse. ‘Come,’ she said, echoing the Green Man.

But Master Woodhouse trembled even more than his companion. He shook his head and closed his eyes against the sight of the door. ‘I cannot,’ he bleated. ‘I might never come back, and then what would become of poor Emma?’

‘You cannot disobey him, you are the Wild Man, you are his servant, the Guardian of Hartfield.’ Dame Baytes was closer to the doorway. She turned her face away from Master Woodhouse and took a deep breath, inhaling the piney, mossy, otherworldly air. ‘Oh,’ she said softly, sounding surprised, as she stepped into the entrance.

‘Dame Baytes, take care! You might never come back!’

Dame Baytes looked back just once, and her face seemed younger. ‘Mercy is a very pleasant thing, Master Woodhouse,’ she said as she stepped over the threshold.

‘Take care not to eat anything!’ Master Woodhouse called after her. ‘Faerie food is very rich!’

But she was gone, leaving Master Woodhouse trembling and quivering in the shadows.



‘IT IS TIME,’ the mushroom fairy wife said to her mushroom fairy spouse.

‘Indeed. It is time.’

‘Time for what?’ Rue asked. She had just finished an enormous bowl of mushroom soup for breakfast. At least, she assumed it was breakfast, for it was very hard to discern the passing of time when one lived underground.

‘Time to go,’ said the fairy wife.

‘Have you packed the gifts?’ asked her spouse.

‘Of course. Would I forget them?’

‘Have you made good your feet for the long walk?’

His wife lifted one tiny foot to show that it was well wrapped in sturdy broadwood leaves to make a good sandal.

‘Have you polished your pipe?’ the wife asked.

He held up his gleaming music pipe.

‘Have you your best cap to hand?’

He took up a cap of skilfully woven leaf threads and placed it on his head with careful precision.

‘The fire is banked,’ said the wife.

‘The store chamber is swept,’ said the husband.

‘Then we shall be off.’

‘Off where?’ said Rue, taking her patched and washed cloak the fairy-wife held out to her. ‘Am I to go home today?’ The thought broke in on her like bright sunshine. She had found it hard to submit to the long days of patient healing.

‘Not directly,’ said the fairy. ‘The law states that any fae or mortal found within the Good Lands on this day, must attend upon Her Majesty and make their goodwill gifts.’

‘What day is it?’ Rue asked.

‘Midsummer, of course,’ said the wife.

‘Midsummer! But I left home on Midwinter!’

The fairies made no answer. They were too busy in gathering up their baskets and hastening to the stairs.

‘And when you talk of Her Majesty, do you mean—?’

‘The Faerie queen. Who else?’ said the husband.

‘We must not be late,’ urged the wife. ‘’Tis a goodly journey, even by the silver paths.’

‘Must be there by dusk,’ said her husband, his voice trailing away as he disappeared up the dark stairs.

‘And what will we do when we get there?’ wondered Rue.

‘Feast and dance,’ said the fairy wife. ‘What else would one do on Midsummer at Court?’

‘Feast and dance!’ Rue bounded up the stairs after them. ‘My most favourite things!’

PICNIC PARADE

There had been another mighty shift in Highbury that morning when the door to Faerie had opened and closed in Hartfield Hall. The field sprites felt every grass stalk quiver, and the tree sylphs were whirled up into the air by the force of it. The brownies all stopped their chores and listened, wondering what was happening now. They would prefer that nothing unusual ever occurred; they liked routine and quiet. Highbury was getting to be an odd place to be these days.

Even the animals, not much susceptible to atmospheres and magic unless directed at them, all neighed and mewed and tweeted and yowled and brayed in a cacophony of a song that resounded through and around the village. 'Midsummer madness,' said the people of Highbury, pausing to wonder at the strange music. They nodded to one another knowingly. They had better not interfere in their fae neighbours' celebrations tonight, for it was a powerful Midsummer mood this year. There must be significant goings-on in the Faerie Court that the effects were rippling so hard across the border.

The high-gee influence was faint now. Folk were still more cheerful than they naturally would be, but they were also somewhat fatigued, as though they'd been expending a good deal more energy than they were used to of late. Almost everyone felt the need for a midday nap.

THE EFFECTS of the spell faded altogether on the picnicking party once they had left the boundary of Highbury. Frank Charmall seemed more ordinary

that day. He was still handsome and fine looking in his riding coat, upon his sleek horse, though Emma and Harriet both felt he had not quite as upright a seat as Master Knightley did. But he was not so jolly and carefree that morning.

Pucks Hill was quiet, save for the sound of birdsong; the fae revelry would not begin until sunset. The picnickers took care to set down their rugs and stools where no fairy dancing ring was evident; they had no wish to bring mischief upon themselves by offending the locals. The servants were given instructions to leave out honey cakes and mead, that any passing fae might help themselves and leave behind a gift and not a prank. The powers of the fae were heightened on this day of the year, even the mildest-tempered sprite could turn troublesome if the mood took them.

It was not a jovial party. Everyone seemed a little listless and weary; a little out of sorts, so Emma considered as she looked around at her companions. Mistress Baytes was the only person talking much, but it was all wearisome nonsense, made up of a good deal of flatteries regarding the view and the day and the arrangement of her niece's hair and Mistress Elftyn's new bonnet. Jane Fairfayce looked positively ill and more like the pining lover than ever. Mistress Elftyn was as vulgar as usual in her flounced gown of leafy green, so bright that it quite hurt the eye to look at her. Did she not know that green was a dangerous colour to wear among the fae? She was drawing unwarranted attention to herself; if there were any mischief about, she would certainly attract it.

Master Elftyn was as rude and cold towards herself and Harriet as was his usual manner. After all the months that had passed since that dreadful marriage proposal, he was still acting the affronted lover. Harriet was still wearing that ridiculous sword, despite Emma's attempts in the carriage to persuade her to take it off, and why did Harriet blush furiously whenever Master Knightley spoke to her?

Master Knightley was grave. He sat with Maid Fairfayce on one side of him, and Harriet on the other. The former was pale as a white rose, while the latter was continually flushing like that of a pink one. It was almost entertaining to watch Harriet's rising and falling blushes, if it were not so puzzling.

'Do eat up that morsel of pie, Jane, dear,' Emma heard Mistress Baytes say, 'for there is a big, greedy looking crow hanging about, and I am sure it is your plate it is watching.'

Master Knightley tried in vain to chase the troublesome crow away, but it remained out of reach, and certainly did seem intent on watching the party.

Master Charmall was restless and loud, and talked almost exclusively to Emma, or about Emma. She tried to laugh at him in return, but in truth he was grating on her nerves. She found she was not in the humour for incessant flirting, and the more they did flirt, the graver Master Knightley looked, and the more disdainful grew the Elftyns' expressions.

Only Master Weston was his usual cheery self, highly encouraging of Frank's flirtation, and oblivious to the general lack of enthusiasm. He tried his best to rouse the party with stories and riddles and jokes, but one by one the party drifted apart, some to walk and some to lounge in the sunshine. Jane Fairfayce persuaded her aunt to walk with her, stumbling a little as she got up, as though she were faint. Master Knightley jumped up, taking hold of Maid Fairfayce's arm, and telling her kindly to lean upon him.

Emma felt a lurch in her stomach at this little scene of gallantry, and all the old, foolish notions of Mistress Weston declaring Master Knightley to be in love with Jane Fairfayce rushed back to her memory, making her feel fresh irritation with Frank and his nonsense. How was it that only yesterday morning she had thought every word Frank Charmall said quite delightful? It was as though some glamour had fallen away from him, and now he was no more than any other young man – and in need of more sense than his youth bestowed upon him.

Emma determined to put a stop to his attentions and declared that she too wished to walk. There was only Harriet and Master Weston remaining of the party now. All else were walking about the hillside. Master Weston lay down with his hat over his eyes, saying he meant to have a little nap, for the pigeon pie and smoked cheese were lying a little heavy upon him.

The great, troublesome crow walked across the grass a little way off. It gave a caw, and Frank jumped, as though startled. 'I'll come with you,' he cried to Emma, bounding to his feet.

'You will join us, Harriet?' said Emma, not wishing for the impropriety of walking alone with Frank.

The crow cawed again, and Frank was at her side. Emma thought she saw Master Charmall take something from his pocket, something small and dark; he glanced about the party, his father was dozing, Harriet was bent over her shoelace. He threw something into the air, like a pinch of pepper. It

was such a quick movement, that she could not be sure, but a soft fall of dark dust floated down over herself and Frank.

By the time Harriet had got to her feet, brushed pie-crust crumbs from her gown and adjusted her ridiculous sword belt, Frank Charmall had taken hold of Emma's arm and fairly tugged her away towards a line of ancient yew trees. It was a strange sensation, but Emma felt as though in the couple of steps she had taken she had walked many yards from where she had started. Surely the line of yew trees had seemed some way off when she had been sat picnicking? A dreadful wave of nausea pass over her. Perhaps her father had been right about the cheese?

'I'm sorry,' Frank said, looking apologetic, as though it were his fault she felt sick.

There was a *caw* from the nearest yew tree; the great crow had followed them.

'Come and sit a minute by this barrow,' Frank urged, an odd note of something like desperation in his voice. He was clutching something shiny he had taken from his pocket. A silvery disc, very like a charm.

'I do not think sitting among barrows on Midsummer Day is wise,' said Emma, thinking of the old stories of barrow wights. She still felt peculiar, but the sickness waned. Vaguely she thought she heard Harriet calling out her name, but she sounded far off. There was another voice, very like that of Sister Myrtle, whose voice was deeper than Harriet's, and well-modulated, as though she had come from a well-to-do family, but her voice was also faint, and how could it be her? She had not come with the party.

'Mistress Woodhouse,' said Frank Charmall, taking hold of one of her hands and pressing something against her palm – the shiny thing he had taken from his pocket. He was very close to her, she could see the little ring of dark brown around his irises, his pupils were very wide, as though he were feeling strong emotion.

'Emma,' he said in a quiet, raspy voice.

She was startled at hearing him use her name. She would have pulled away a step, but he held her hand fast, and while he held it, and the silvery disk was against her palm, she felt all the force of an attraction between them rekindle, just as she had done before.

'You. Must. Know. How. Ardentlly. I. Love. You.'

Someone else had said those very same words to her only six months ago; on that occasion she had been rumbling along in a carriage at nearly

midnight at Midwinter, now she was surrounded by yews and barrows at nearly midday at Midsummer. She tried again to pull away, feeling that something was wrong and not as it ought to be.

‘Say. That. You. Will. Be. Mine.’

Why was he speaking as though every word was being extracted from him as a bad tooth? Why did she have this horrible pressure upon her head, causing her to feel as though she were in some kind of stupor, as though she were compelled to do as he asked?

‘Marry. Me.’ Frank shuddered and fell to his knees, still clutching her hand. His posture was not that of an earnest lover, he looked too dejected. Was his despair because he feared her refusal?

She tried to say that she was very mindful of the compliment of his proposal, wanted to say that she regarded him very highly, though only as a friend... but when she opened her mouth to speak, other words came out, as if her tongue had turned traitor. The smell of yew was strong, the ancient barrows thrummed with old, unfriendly magic. Frank Charmall was one moment only Master Charmall, her lively friend, the next he was her irresistible lover, and she must have him for her own...

‘I...’ she stammered,

‘Say. *I. do.*’ Frank urged in a choking voice. His right hand held her own, with the charm pressed between their palms, but his left hand was groping at his cravat, as though it were painfully tight. Now he fumbled for something in his pocket, and pulled out a golden ring. His breathing seemed to ease once he had it in his hand, but his expression was still one of anguish.

‘I... I...’

The ring was poised close to her left hand. Her lips and tongue and teeth moved against her own will to form the word ‘*do*’. She resisted, feeling anger rise up that she should be compelled against her own will in this way.

‘I. Am. Your. True. Love,’ gasped Frank, as though the words were dragged from him.

The smell of yew bore down on her, but she fought back with much effort of resistance. A little whisper wrapped about her face, like a friendly sylph bearing the smell of something wonderful: the smell of apples. In her mind she saw a large, golden, fragrant apple, and the smell wafted over her, sweeping away Frank’s stilted words of love.

Frank's face shimmered before her, first golden and handsome, but then it was blurry and another's face came before her mind's eye: a familiar, well-beloved face, one that had looked at her with so much gravity all that morning – the face of Master Knightley.

There was a great tussle between the compulsion to say what she was being asked to say, and her own will which did *not* wish to say what she was being made to.

'Say. *I. do,*' gasped Frank, as though he were struggling as much as she. The cold silvery charm between their palms was almost burning like ice. The golden ring hovered a hair's breadth from her ring finger.

'I... I... d... do...'

Something flew into Frank, knocking him onto his back with an '*Ooof!*' of shock.

Emma blinked, seeing nothing there. The silvery charm had fallen to the ground and the golden ring had likewise fallen and rolled away. Immediately she felt released from the compulsion she had been under.

'Don't say I do!' bellowed a voice, and Sister Myrtle threw back her hood, appearing in the clearing, running hard, her black hair come loose to tumble about her face, her eyes wide and fierce.

'Keep him down, Margool!' yelled Sister Myrtle.

The black crow on the barrow launched into the air and swooped down where Frank lay, the bird's talons outstretched, as though to pierce Frank's chest.

'Get away, you foul thing!' Sister Myrtle shouted, snatching up a long stick and belting the crow with it before it reached Frank. The bird screeched and wheeled away.

Emma looked down at Frank in horror, watching him wrestling with some invisible force that pinned him to the ground.

Sister Myrtle saw the charm on the ground. 'Filthy thing!' she cried, kicking it away. 'Did he propose?' she demanded, panting for breath. 'You cannot marry him, it's a trap!'

Emma's head was clearing now. The smell of yew had fully receded.

'Did you accept him?' urged the wild Godmother.

'No. Yes. But no.'

Harriet came rushing into the clearing, panting hard, and pressing her hand to her side as though she had a stitch. 'Oh, Mistress Woodhouse!' she

cried. ‘You have not said yes, have you? You must not marry him! It’s all a dreadfully, horribly, wicked plan!’

THE LOVERS

‘**W**hat is attacking him?’ Emma cried out, watching in horror as Frank writhed on the ground.

‘Let go!’ Sister Myrtle called out to whatever was holding down Frank. ‘You can let him go now!’

The indent in Frank’s waistcoat lifted, and Frank groaned in relief.

‘Are you harmed?’ said Emma, rushing to Frank’s side and bending over him, but with caution, for there was some unseen, fearsome creature somewhere close by. ‘Can we help you up? Get you anything? Shall we send for your father?’

‘No, no,’ groaned Frank. ‘Just give me a moment and I shall be well.’

‘What threw him down?’ was Emma’s next question. She looked around, her eyes following the direction of an animal-like noise: something like a cross between a dog’s excited yip and a fox’s bark. ‘What invisible monster of yours is this?’

‘He’s not a monster,’ said Sister Myrtle.

‘He’s wearing a forgetfulness cloak,’ Harriet said. ‘That’s what makes him invisible.’

‘Let me see it,’ said Emma. ‘It is most alarming not seeing what is prowling around.’

‘That would not be a good idea,’ said Sister Myrtle.

‘Why not?’

‘People think he’s a dragon,’ said Harriet. ‘And they get scared. I was scared when first I saw him. But he’s not really a dragon. And he doesn’t burn things. Only eats them.’

‘Eats people?’ Emma’s alarm heightened.

‘No, no,’ said Harriet. ‘Not people. Wood, mostly. Sticks and things. And food, of course. But he does not care for cake.’

‘Let me see this creature for myself,’ said Emma.

‘Do show her,’ Harriet urged Myrtle.

‘Very well,’ said Myrtle. ‘But no running away shrieking of dragons.’

Emma drew herself up tall and said coolly, ‘I am sure I have never shrieked in my life.’

Myrtle unfastened the bindings round the cloak, and the margool leapt up, stretching its long neck and flapping its bat-like wings.

Emma took a step back, blinking in surprise. ‘It does look remarkably like a dragon,’ she said, her voice higher than usual, but carefully restrained from the pitch of a shriek. ‘You’re quite sure it has no fire?’

‘Quite sure,’ said Sister Myrtle.

Frank slowly raised himself into a sitting position. He stared at the creature, bounding about. ‘A margool,’ he said in amazement. ‘I thought they were extinct!’

‘What do you know of them?’ said Myrtle.

‘I’ve seen drawings of them in my aunt’s library,’ said Frank, unable to take his eyes from the creature. ‘But I never thought to see one in real life.’

‘Your aunt has a book on margools?’ Myrtle’s eyes gleamed with interest.

‘Never mind about books,’ said Emma. ‘There are more important things to discuss, are there not? Sister Myrtle, you said Master Charmall was leading me into a trap.’

‘A trap to make you marry him,’ said Harriet.

‘Why?’ Emma demanded, directing her question to Frank, who was still sat on the ground, gazing in wonder at the margool. The margool pranced and strutted, and displayed his repertoire of growls and chirrups and made green puffs, very happy to be admired so openly.

‘I said, *why*, Master Charmall?’ repeated Emma, her hands on her hips. ‘Why would you use despicable charms and magic against me to compel me to marry you? I thought you were a friend?’

Frank dragged his gaze from the margool to meet Emma’s eyes. He got slowly to his feet and bowed his head as he said, ‘I am sorrier than I can say, Mistress Woodhouse. I was under compulsion.’ He put a finger to his cravat and tugged at something underneath it.

‘Is that a bond around your neck?’ Myrtle asked, seeing a glimpse of a thin cord and recalling the one just like it on Rue’s neck at the gate of the witch’s house.

‘It is,’ said Frank. ‘Wretched, vile thing. Bane of my life.’

‘Who put it there?’ asked Emma, her angry expression softening. ‘Is this the work of the witch? Did you make an enemy of her when you shot your arrows at her and rescued me?’ Emma’s face clouded with confusion. ‘But if you drove her away, how is it you are in her power now? And why would she want to force us into a marriage?’

Frank looked miserable and hung his head.

‘Are you going to tell her?’ Myrtle prompted him.

He lifted his brown eyes like a beseeching hound.

‘Tell Mistress Woodhouse what your connection to the witch of the Wild Woods is. She deserves to know.’

Emma fixed a compelling look on Frank and waited. He groaned the groan of a man of misery. ‘She is... my aunt.’

There was no time for more than a gasp of shock from Emma and Harriet at this revelation, for a shadow falling and a rush of wings above their heads told them that the crow had returned.

Frank threw himself back to the ground as the bird dived at his head.

‘Vicious thing!’ said Myrtle, snatching up a stick, ready to strike if it whirled back at them. Harriet pulled out her sword and swung wildly, causing everyone to duck.

‘Can’t your margool creature deal with it?’ Emma asked. But even as she spoke, the crow alighted a little way off and shimmered blackly, growing like a towering storm cloud. Inch by inch it altered before everyone’s fascinated and horrified eyes, expanding degree by degree until it was the height and shape of a black horse.

‘You must help Jane!’ Frank cried out, his hands clutching at the cord about his neck.

‘Jane?’ said Emma. ‘Do you mean Maid Fairfayce?’

‘My aunt has vowed to hurt her if I fail... to... marry... you,’ gasped Frank, staggering with resistant steps towards the waiting horse.

‘How can we help her?’ Myrtle cried. ‘What can be done to stop the witch?’

‘Cut... off... her... power...’ Frank looked as a man choking to death. The black horse pawed the ground and made a rough, impatient snort.

‘Don’t go!’ cried Harriet.

It was clear that Frank was under compulsion. Though resisting with all his strength that he might speak these last words to them, he was being irrevocably dragged to the waiting beast.

‘What is the source of her power?’ Myrtle asked, following after him, though the margool caught at the hem of her cloak and tried to tug her away from the snorting horse. ‘What is the source of her power?’ she said again, desperate for some clue that would aid them, and aware that they might never see Frank Charmall again. Who knew what plan the witch would carry out next?

‘Hidden... gate...’ gasped Frank.

‘Her power is behind a hidden gate?’ repeated Myrtle. ‘Where is this gate?’

‘End...’

‘End what? What is the power?’

‘Her... name...’ gasped Frank. He was on the back of the horse, leaning over its neck as though falling into a faint.

‘Her name?’ repeated Myrtle, getting as close as she dared. ‘What does that mean?’

But Frank sank against the horse, his eyes holding onto Myrtle’s, as though he desperately wanted her to understand him. He could utter only one last word in a barely audible voice: ‘*Jane*,’ he whispered, then was borne away by the beast, which galloped faster than any mortal horse could run. They were a speck against the landscape in a very short while.



‘WHY, SISTER MYRTLE,’ cried Mistress Baytes. ‘How came you to pop up?’ She looked about at the trio of young ladies: Myrtle, Harriet and Emma. All of them looking a little wild. The margool was safely cloaked from sight. ‘But where is Master Charmall?’ Mistress Baytes enquired. ‘Is this some Midsummer trick to swap him for Sister Myrtle?’ she laughed, but no one joined in. Jane Fairfayce looked on anxiously, and Master Knightley waited keenly to hear what the explanation was of this change in the party. The Elftyn’s were still walking about on the hill.

‘He is gone,’ said Emma, sinking to her knees on the picnic rug, still feeling a little sick and affected from the magic used against her.

‘Gone where?’ said Master Weston, looking groggy from his nap, and rather red on the lower half of his face, which had not been shaded from the midday sun.

‘Gone home,’ said Emma with an air of confusion. ‘I believe. The influence of the... of his aunt.’

‘She sent a horse,’ added Harriet, taking the reviving cup of wine Mistress Baytes had poured with due haste to pass to Mistress Woodhouse.

‘Well, this is extraordinary,’ said Master Weston, getting to his feet with a few grunts. ‘Ahhh,’ he said, wagging a knowing finger at Emma. He leaned towards her to say in a low voice, but not low enough to keep from the whole party hearing, ‘*Lover’s tiff*. But don’t fret, my dear, it is only a bit of Midsummer madness. You’ll mend things before the day is out. Nothing like Midsummer Night for things of love and so forth.’ He wagged his finger again sagely. ‘Now, how about we have a little bite and sup of something before we think about heading back, what do you all say? I suppose the cream is no good now, the heat has quite spoiled it. But the strawberries will taste the sweeter for a bit of sunshine on them. Did anyone think to pack some sugar? Most unaccountable of Frank to fly off without a by-your-leave, but he can be impulsive. Most disagreeable of his aunt to drag him away from his friends in this way, but she’s a difficult woman, I’m sorry to say. A very odd-tempered woman. Most capricious. And poor Frank had no time to eat more than a slice of that excellent pie. Where is that pie?’

‘Master Weston,’ said Emma, clutching the cup. ‘Do you know of Mistress Charmall’s true identity?’

‘True identity?’ Master Weston looked up from the picnic basket. ‘Someone’s run off with the pie. Look at that trail of crumbs! Some imp or hob has been here.’

‘Master Weston,’ said Emma, gaining his full attention by the urgency of her voice. ‘Did you know that Master Charmall’s aunt is a *witch*?’

‘A witch?’ said Master Knightley, turning to Sister Myrtle. ‘*The witch*?’ Myrtle nodded.

‘A witch!’ bellowed Master Weston.

‘A witch! Where?’ shrieked Mistress Elftyn who now came running towards them, her skirt lifted above her ankles, her hat in shambles and her gown dreadfully torn and dirtied.

‘Mistress Elftyn, did you meet with an accident?’ cried Mistress Baytes, seeing the dishevelled state of the lady.

‘Imps!’ cried Mistress Elftyn. ‘All over me! Dreadful! Terrifying! Quite faint! Is there a witch also?’

Master Elftyn caught up with his wife, and she clung to him. ‘Master E, you must fight off the witch and take me home! I won’t stay another minute in this cursed place! Imps all over me! Fetch me a cup of wine before I faint!’

There was a good deal of confusion and distress and everyone talking over everyone else of witches and imps and Frank being carried away and Mistress Elftyn being set upon, and Jane Fairfayce white as a ghost, and every item of food that bore meat or fish suddenly vanishing from the picnic hamper.

‘Everyone be calm!’ Master Knightley commanded, lifting his hands up to gain the party’s attention.

‘No witch has been sighted,’ he assured them. ‘Is that correct, Sister Myrtle?’

‘It is,’ she replied.

‘Where did *she* come from?’ Mistress Elftyn asked her husband, staring at Myrtle. ‘I thought she was the witch at first glance.’

‘What is this about Master Charmall’s aunt being a witch?’ Mistress Baytes asked in a quivering voice. ‘Surely not? I understand she is known to be a difficult woman, but surely not a *witch*. I can hardly believe it. Can you believe it, Jane? Oh, my dear, you look so dreadfully ill, we really must get you home. Dear me, what a dreadful turn this day is taking, poor Mistress Elftyn attacked and poor Master Charmall taken away from us, and dear Jane fit to faint, dear me!’

‘I suggest we all go home immediately,’ said Master Knightley. ‘Master Weston, order the carriages made ready.’

Master Weston had been in a frightful pother over this talk of Frank and his aunt, but a firm order revived his old military training, and he made a small salute in reply, dropping the clutch of strawberries in his hand, and made haste to organise the horses and carriages waiting a little way off in a shady copse.

‘Let me assist you,’ Master Knightley said to Emma.

Master Elftyn had his wife safely on one arm and Maid Fairfayce on the other, with Mistress Baytes supporting her niece on the other side. They

hurried away to their carriage.

‘I am well,’ said Emma, ‘Only a little dizzy, it is nothing,’ but she took his hand and allowed him to help her to her feet. ‘Did you know about the aunt?’ she asked him.

‘No. It’s as much a revelation to me as to you. But it makes sense of some puzzling things.’ He shot a glance at Myrtle, who was scolding her invisible margool for raiding the picnic basket.

‘But what of Maid Fairfayce?’ Harriet asked, hurrying to keep pace beside them, for they made a tall couple with a longer stride than she had. ‘Master Charmall was very worried about her. What can be done to protect her?’

‘Why would the witch want to harm Jane Fairfayce?’ wondered Emma.

Sister Myrtle fell in beside them. ‘No doubt it was something to do with their secret engagement.’

‘Secret engagement!’ Emma cried, drawing up short, so that Master Knightley’s arm was pulled loose. ‘Secret engagement!’ exclaimed Emma again. ‘What can you mean?’

‘It is true,’ Harriet said. ‘We only learned of it yesterday. They have been secretly engaged for ever so long.’

Emma looked more shocked by this than by the revelation of the witch as Frank’s aunt.

‘Come, my dear Emma,’ said Master Knightley, taking hold of Emma’s arm and gently propelling her away before she could say another word. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said softly, as he assisted her into the carriage.

She looked back at him, still surprised as this new revelation of Frank supposedly in a secret engagement with another woman, all the while seeming to have been pursuing herself.

‘Time, my dearest Emma, time will heal the wound,’ Master Knightley said, looking strangely grieved. He squeezed her fingers tenderly before withdrawing. ‘Directly home to Hartfield, James, as quickly as you can safely go,’ he ordered the coachman. He took Harriet’s hand to help her in, then closed the door. ‘Comfort her as best you can,’ he said in a low voice to Harriet, who was seated by the open window. ‘This will be a great blow.’

Harriet had flushed deeply for some reason and could not meet his eye, but she nodded at his request.

‘Master Charmall’s horse is still here,’ Myrtle called to Master Knightley, distracting his attention from the coach which was now creaking

away down the grassy track.

‘I’ll ride it back,’ she said. ‘I’ve tired out the poor mount I came on. I was going as fast as I could. My apologies for taking one of your farm horses without your consent, but it was a matter of urgency. The engagement was broken just in time.’

‘So he did propose then?’ Master Knightley said. ‘He is a disgrace to the name of man.’

‘I don’t know that he had much choice in the matter,’ said Myrtle. ‘He is but a slave to his aunt’s will.’

‘Yes, yes. Perhaps I judge too harshly. It is hard when he has wounded those I care about. He’s come among us, deceived us all. He could have made a confession long ago.’

‘You do not make allowance for the control he has been under since a young child,’ Myrtle said. ‘We must help him. The only way to release Mistress Woodhouse and Maid Fairfayce and Rue and Ben and Master Smith *and* Master Charmall is to remove the source of the witch’s power.’

‘And how, pray, shall we do that?’

‘Master Charmall spoke of her power being behind hidden gates and being tied to her name. It seems I have a fresh conundrum to puzzle out. Perhaps Master Weston will give me some clue.’

Master Weston was ordering the horses and grooms into an order worthy of a parade ground. All military confidence quite dissolved when Myrtle approached him with the subject of Frank and his aunt.

‘I cannot believe it,’ he mourned, ‘and yet, I always knew there was something odd about her. She was so persuasive when she came to ask for Frank. She’s the great aunt, or great-great aunt of my wife, my late wife, very rich, very strong lady, quite the sort to get her own way, most persuasive, I thought it the right thing, I was flat broke, you know. I was not what I am now, I was a bankrupt, to my shame, and a witch had cursed me, saying she would take Frank away, and here this great relative, offering to give Frank a safe home and an education and an inheritance, how could I refuse? What could I offer him? Very persuasive. All happened so quick. I barely said the word, and the papers were all there, pen put in my hand.’

‘Master Weston, you had little if any chance of withstanding the persuasions of a sorceress,’ said Myrtle. ‘But you must help me if you can. Tell me what your son meant by hidden gates? Tell me what you know of his aunt’s name?’

‘Great-great aunt,’ said Master Weston morosely. ‘Hidden gates, hey? I’ve never been to Endscome. Perhaps it has hidden gates? I cannot say. Her name? I only know her as Mistress Charmall, Blazing Blunderbusses, I don’t even recall her first name. Some odd fae name, I’ll warrant. Something to do with fungus.’

‘Fungus?’

‘Family motto or something or other, the family did things with fungus for the fae court. Made charms and so forth. I seem to remember Frank talking of it. Dryad or Morel or Scarletina, some combination of such names. I cannot recall, I’m sorry.’

‘Please, you must think harder,’ urged Myrtle. ‘Lives depend on it, Master Weston.’

Master Weston rubbed his forehead and stroked his chin and looked up at the sky and down at his riding boots. But he could not give Myrtle any other clue.

Myrtle gave a little groan of vexation. ‘May I ride Master Charmall’s horse home?’ she said. ‘I rather wore out the horse I came on. It would not be fair to push him beyond walk on the way back.’ She bent down to fiddle with something, pausing a moment to say, ‘Master Weston, do not be alarmed by my margool. I assure you he is not a dragon, nor is he dangerous to people or horses.’

‘You’re not dressed for riding, and Frank’s horse has no side-saddle,’ protested Master Weston, ‘and what’s a margool? What are you – *aarghh* – Great Cannonballs, what is *that*?’

Myrtle had raised the hood of her cloak and vanished before mounting onto Frank’s horse; her margool, freed from the cloak, stretched out his wings ready to fly beside her.

‘That, my dear sir, is a margool,’ said Master Knightley, putting a restraining hand on his companion to keep him from reaching for his riding crop.

‘But no one can ride Cobweb except Frank!’ called back Master Weston. ‘He’s fae, you know!’

‘I’ve always wanted to ride a fae-bred horse,’ Myrtle called back, her voice floating from thin air above the saddle. ‘I’ll see you back at Highbury.’

Frank’s horse galloped powerfully down the sloping path, with the margool screeching happily above the pound of the hooves.

THE AGONY OF A MIND THAT WOULD BEAR NO
MORE

‘I believe I owe you an apology, Harriet,’ said Emma, ‘in trying to shame you into taking off that sword. The day’s events have proved quite meet for swords and sticks and all manner of weaponry. Who would imagine a simple picnic could prove so perilous? Even *my* powers of fancy and foretelling could not have anticipated such a day.’ Emma leaned her head back against the carriage seat. The motion of the vehicle was not pleasant to her jangled nerves. ‘Frank Charmall and Jane Fairfayce secretly engaged,’ she marvelled. ‘And all the while he has been courting me and behaving as though there were no other woman in the world.’

‘You did foretell a romantic and tragic affair for her,’ Harriet reminded her.

‘So I did. But I never imagined it would be with the nephew of a wicked witch.’

‘Are you dreadfully heartbroken?’ Harriet asked. ‘I’m very sorry if you are. It is the most horrible thing in the world to know that the man you love best can never be with you, even if he has proposed.’

‘Of course I am not heartbroken. I never really cared for Frank Charmall. I liked him very well as a friend, and as a dance partner. I *considered* caring for him, and I fell under his charms as much as I was meant to. But I am not truly injured. I am more fearful for what has become of him. What can be done?’

‘How I wish Mother Goodword were here,’ said Harriet. ‘She would know what to do. I never seem to know what is to be done.’

‘I owe you a second apology, Harriet.’

‘You do?’

‘I confess I thought Frank Charmall would make a perfect match for yourself.’

‘For me?’

‘The idea came to me when I saw him carrying you into Hartfield, that day he rescued you from the imps and the witch, or gypsy, whatever she was. I did not speak of it, for I had made such a wretched blunder over Master Elftyn.’

‘Me! And Frank Charmall?’ Harriet laughed. ‘Who would want to go into Faerie to live with him and a witch for an aunt?’

‘Obviously I did not know about his aunt when the idea came to me.’

‘He *was* very brave that day he saved me,’ Harriet admitted. ‘If those imps were to come upon me now, I should see them off myself.’ She patted her sword. ‘Fancy Mistress Elftyn getting attacked by imps. Her hat and gown were quite ruined.’

‘That is the risk one takes when one dresses in fairy green on Midsummer Day,’ said Emma. ‘I am amazed her brownie let her out of the house wearing it. I wonder her husband did not say anything to dissuade her. I suppose she thought herself fit to be a Green Lady herself.’

‘I should never be so foolish as to wear green on such a day,’ agreed Harriet. ‘But it was a pity to see her hat so spoilt. Those silk orchids are prodigiously expensive. She ought to have gone searching for real orchids like Master Knightley did.’

Emma had closed her eyes for a few moments. ‘Master Knightley and orchids. What do you mean, Harriet?’

Harriet was silent, so Emma opened her eyes to see her friend blushing furiously and smiling to herself.

‘What do you mean? What is this about Master Knightley and orchids?’ Emma gave a little gasp. ‘Did he pick orchids for Maid Fairfayce?’

‘No. Not for Maid Fairfayce. For me.’

Emma stared. ‘Why would Master Knightley pick orchids for you?’

‘For my birthday.’

‘Of course. He sent you flowers from the gardens at Donwell. That is just the sort of thing he would do.’

‘He did not send them, he brought them in person. And they did not come from the gardens, he picked them himself. They were meadow flowers. And it was only one orchid. It was a rare one. It was... *Love’s Wish*.’

Emma stared harder. Her mind was struggling to make sense of all that Harriet was implying.

‘I think he cares for me,’ said Harriet shyly. ‘I do not think him the kind of man to bring *Love’s Wish* to a maid on Midsummer Eve if he did not care for her. Do you?’

For the second time that day, Emma struggled bodily to say what she wished to say on the subject of romantic feelings. She was truly stunned. She was appalled. *Master Knightley in love with Harriet!* When she did manage to speak, her voice was low and tremulous.

‘Have you any other reason to believe that Master Knightley cares for you?’

‘Ever since the ball at the Crown he has shown me a good deal of attention,’ said Harriet. ‘He barely spoke to me or showed me any notice before then. But since that evening, he has always taken the trouble to speak with me whenever we should happen to meet.’

Emma though this over and had to admit that Harriet’s observations were correct. Master Knightley had not made any disparaging remarks about Harriet and her giggling or youth and folly for some time.

‘Are you well, Mistress Woodhouse? You look dreadfully pale. Has the sickness returned?’

Emma could only nod miserably. She could say no more on the subject.

What a dreadful, wretchedly long journey this was! What a horrible day! Why did it feel as though the end of the world had come? Why did it feel as though the sun had withdrawn forever? She stifled a sob within her breast. It was because... she gave a little gasp of sudden knowledge... it was because... *she* loved Master Knightley. She always had. She always would. There was no other man in the world who could compare with him. But she had lost him. Had lost him to *Harriet*. The girl she had thought to notice, to raise up. To see well matched. What cruel irony was this!

IT WAS a heavy-hearted Mistress Woodhouse who returned to Hartfield. She could barely speak a word of farewell to Harriet when she alighted at the school. She could hardly look at her.

As the carriage passed through the village, she saw Mistress Perry setting out with her basket to gather herbs on Midsummer Night. The doors in the village were decorated with herb and flower garlands. The fae

blacksmith had fashioned branches of wrought iron and hung little lamps all over it ready to light at dusk. Highbury square held a growing pile of wood, for a village bonfire. It would be an evening of light and dancing, and many marriage proposals would be made, as was the tradition.

The fae servants at Hartfield had festooned the entrance to the manor with garlands and branches of green birch. The smell of lilies and fennel was strong in the warm summer evening, but Emma's heart was heavy and sick.

'Evening, ma'am,' the butler greeted her in the hall.

'Has my father dined?' she enquired as she gave him her straw hat.

The butler looked perturbed. 'The master has not left the Great Hall, ma'am.'

'Has he been there long? He was to wait for my return.'

'He has been there since you left, ma'am.'

'What do you mean? I left him drinking tea with Dame Baytes. How could he be in the Great Hall since my departure?'

She was irritated at such irrational information; she felt too weary to unravel any more nonsense after a morning full of it.

'The master and Dame Baytes entered the Great Hall almost immediately after your departure, ma'am. And neither have come out again.'

Emma stared in confusion at him, then hurried away to see for herself. It could not be as he said; there was some mistake.

She opened the door to the Hall. The heavy studded door required some effort to push. 'Papa, are you there?'

He was there. Almost a shadow in the glow of green light.

'Papa, is it true? Have you been here all day? But where is Dame Baytes? Has she gone home a long while since?'

Master Woodhouse was leaning against the outer wall of the hall looking very old and frail, as though he had shrunk. She hurried to his side. 'Has the Green Man been angry? I thought you were to wait for me before you came before him?'

'Emma, my dear, I am glad you are home. You are back very soon.'

'Very soon? Papa, I have been gone more than five hours. Why have you not eaten?'

'More than five hours, my dear? But it seems only a moment since you left.'

It was then that Emma felt the powerful presence in the Hall. Had it not been Midsummer, when the air in all the village was full of the scent of magic, she would have noticed it much sooner. Her concern for her father had dulled her senses, as had her unhappy thoughts. Now that she paid attention to her surroundings, she felt the thick presence of Faerie magic; a presence that had no sense of time.

There was a gleam of green light from the carving on the wall, and the door into Faerie was ajar. In all her twenty years she had never seen or heard of the door standing open. The Green Man had only spoken through the carving before.

‘Where is Dame Baytes?’ Emma asked, worried at the abstracted expression of her father.

‘Gone, my dear. Gone.’

‘Gone where, Papa? Gone home?’

‘Gone into Faerie to seek mercy.’

‘Papa, I beg you will speak plainly with me. Why has Dame Baytes gone into Faerie, and why should she need to seek mercy?’

‘She is the thief, Emma. I can hardly believe it, but she is the thief. She stole the magic.’

Emma shook her head in amazement.

‘It is true, my dear. It is very shocking, but it is true. She stole Mother Goodword’s wand that she might make a match for her granddaughter.’

‘Make a match with whom?’ Emma wondered, astonished at this news.

‘I do not know. A rich and handsome young man.’

That sounded very like Frank Charmall. That explained how it was that he and Maid Fairfayce had been brought unaccountably together.

‘How long has Dame Baytes been gone, Papa? Her daughter and granddaughter will be at home now, and will wonder where she is.’

Master Woodhouse pointed a shaking finger at the Door. ‘He called us to come.’

‘He called you both? But only Dame Baytes went?’

‘How could I go? I might never come back.’

‘But to disobey! Dear me!’

‘I am a sad invalid, Emma. I am not fit to be Guardian. I fear we shall have to leave Hartfield. I fear we shall be cast out. How shall we bear it, Emma? What shall we do? Where will we go?’

‘Oh, Papa.’ Emma took his arm. ‘Shall we go through the Door together?’

‘No, no. I beg you will not speak of such a thing. Of all things I could not bear for you to go into Faerie. People do not always come back, you know.’

‘But to disobey, Papa. It is very grave. If we do not come back, we shall at least be together. We have only each other, after all, do we not?’

Master Woodhouse only trembled more violently, but the door to Faerie creaked open a little wider, and the Green Man’s voice resounded through the Hall in a low vibration. ‘*Come.*’ The word was taken up by the carved trees, whose leaves shook and whispered ‘*Come.*’ Birdsong mingled with the sound of distant pipes and flutes, and the song and music repeated over and over the word ‘*Come*’.

‘Papa, we must go,’ said Emma firmly. ‘Take up your staff.’

But Master Woodhouse only backed farther away from the door, not towards it. ‘It’s so very green,’ he whimpered.

The birdsong and call of the pipes grew more insistent. The trees began to bend and shake as though a summer storm was coming.

‘I’m sorry, Papa. But I must do this.’ Emma took hold of the staff, the symbol of the Wild Man Guardian.

‘Emma, what are you doing?’

‘I must go to the Green Man and answer his summons. I will go in your place. Perhaps he will help us. Our neighbours and friends are in danger. We cannot stay and do nothing. We have a duty.’

She reached the doorway now, and the light fell on her, transforming her from ordinary to the likeness of a lady fit for the court of the Faerie queen.

‘Will you come, Papa?’ she asked one last time, holding out her hand. ‘Let us go together.’

A woodland sylph peeked through the door and gusted round her playfully, rippling her gown and lifting loose tendrils of hair about her neck and face.

‘You look like your mother,’ said Master Woodhouse faintly.

‘Oh, Papa,’ said Emma, as she stepped onto the threshold and took her first deep breath of the Green Man’s land. ‘Freedom is a wonderful thing.’

‘Emma!’ cried Master Woodhouse.

But she was gone and a noise like a great earthquake roared around Hartfield, rattling windows and doors and Master Woodhouse’s nerves with

all the ferocity of a dragon.

SO SUDDEN A JOURNEY

Myrtle only waited long enough for Harriet to return home. She wanted to go immediately, but she felt it was only right to let Harriet know of her plans.

‘I’m going,’ Myrtle announced, the moment Harriet turned in at the gates of the school.

‘Going where?’ said Harriet.

‘To stop the witch. To get Rue and the others free.’

‘How will you do that?’

‘I don’t know. But I know there are hidden gates at Endscome, and behind those gates is the source of the witch’s power. I need to find it and destroy it.’

‘You make it sound easy,’ said Harriet, her bonnet hanging limply in her hand. ‘I thought everything would be righted once we found the thief, and you stopped the engagement.’

‘Finding the thief will close the bridge, but unless Myrtle and Frank Charmall and Ben Larkins come walking back into Highbury safe and sound, it’s not over yet.’

‘And Master Smith,’ added Harriet sadly. ‘Oh dear. This is all very bad. You might die, Myrtle.’

‘Possibly. But the alternative is to sit around and do nothing to help. Is that what a Godmother does? Is that what a friend does?’

Harriet shook her head slowly. ‘But how will you get to Frank Charmall’s house if the bridge is closed?’

‘I have his horse. A fae-bred horse will always find its way home.’

Harriet looked over at the great, black horse grazing on the grass and wildflowers bordering the bee garden.

‘Rue would be cross to see all her borage eaten,’ said Harriet, in a small, sad voice.

The margool was snoozing in the shade of a bush, tired from his flight home.

‘What’s that?’ she was looking at the parcel Myrtle held.

‘A book from Donwell. It has information about the witch. I might find someone in Faerie who can explain it to me. There’s a good deal about fungi and its uses. I will show it to a mushroom fairy I met in Silver Woods.’

‘Will that horse carry two?’ Harriet asked.

‘The margool will fly.’

‘I meant me. I want to come.’

‘I might not come back, Harriet.’

‘I know. But this is Godmothering business. More importantly, it’s friend business.’

Myrtle was silent.

‘I’ve made up my mind, Myrtle.’ Harriet looked somewhat surprised as she said this. ‘I’ve made a decision.’ She stood up taller. ‘I’m coming.’

‘Bring your sword then. And Lady Stormont’s shield. It might come in useful.’

Harriet hurried to fetch the shield and came back clanking away in full armour.

‘I feel braver in it,’ she explained, raising up the visor to speak. ‘Even if I die or get captured forever or turned into a spider or a shark or something even more terrifying, I will feel braver about it in this. It’s not heavy,’ she assured Myrtle, lifting her shield. ‘This fairy metal is amazingly light. And Master Charmall’s horse looks big and strong.’

‘Come on,’ said Myrtle. ‘We’ll use the wall as a mounting block. Let’s not waste another moment.’

‘No, indeed,’ agreed Harriet, trying with some difficulty to lift her leg up to stand on the low wall. She put a hand out for Myrtle to assist her. ‘What might be two minutes here might be two thousand minutes in Faerie, or is it the other way round?’

She gained the wall, but swayed a little as she found her balance. The margool awoke and emerged from under the bush. His head turned silvery

as he neared Harriet's armour.

'Poor Rue and Master Charmall might have been suffering for years, just like that poor princess who goes to sleep for a minute and wakes up and finds a hundred years has gone by!'



MASTER KNIGHTLEY ENSURED that Emma's carriage and the Elftyn's carriage, bearing Jane Fairfayce and her aunt, reached Highbury safely. He stabled his horse, then walked to the darkling bridge to see if it were closed and gone, now that the magic-thief had been found.

The bridge was gone, he saw with some satisfaction. There was not even a trace of the ghostly outline of it. There were some fresh hoof marks in the soft bank, however, as though a horse had very recently crossed over, and they were uncommonly large prints too. But all that mattered was that the wretched gateway to the darkling paths was shut again. It was not the end of Highbury's problems, but it was a good beginning.

He would go on to Hartfield next to find out all that had happened in his absence. The Green Man would show himself to the Wild Man Guardian this evening, but would Master Woodhouse have the strength for it?

And how was Emma bearing up under the blow of discovering that the man she loved was in love with another?

Poor Emma must feel as though her whole world had been shaken. As this thought came to him, the ground beneath his feet gave a low rumble and quivered. He jumped back in alarm, thinking the riverbank was collapsing, but the quaking sensation was everywhere.

The surface of the river rippled, and the flow halted midstream as some force interrupted the natural direction. He looked about him, thinking that a thunderstorm had broken out, but the sky above was clear and bright with not a cloud. The rumble and shifting ceased after a long minute, and he hurried towards Hartfield, wondering what this new phenomenon portended.



MISTRESS BAYTES DID NOT MISS her mother, nor did Jane miss her grandmama. Not at first. Both were too engaged with Mistress Elftyn, who had insisted on them returning home with her for supper where they could talk over the day and see the lights lit for Midsummer Night.

‘We will go to my house and then send the carriage round for your mother,’ Mistress Elftyn said as the carriage rattled over the cobbled street of Highbury. ‘Your maid can put her in and bring her round to us for tea.’

‘So very kind,’ said Mistress Baytes. ‘So very obliging. Mother will be delighted to come. She will be quite astonished to get the message that she is to come for tea. What a treat.’

‘I declare,’ said Mistress Elftyn, as the carriage rumbled up the Broadway, ‘these rustic festivals are very charming and quaint. I have ordered our housekeeper to put up real flower arrangements over the door. None of those cottage garden bunches, all scrambled together. You may call me a little too nice, but I like my flowers to be properly arranged. I daresay it is the influence of living in a house with formal gardens for so long. We had a hothouse, too. *Delightful* grapes in the hothouse.’ She sighed.

‘I believe the wild herbs and flowers have significance,’ Jane Fairfayce said. ‘It is all part of the tradition.’

‘Tradition is all very well,’ said Mistress Elftyn airily, but we must have progress, or the world will never get anywhere. When one has gone into society as much as myself, one gets a taste for progress and feels quite encumbered by outdated tradition. But what is this?’ They had reached Green Lane and the Elftyn’s cottage came into view. ‘Those are not the delphiniums and chrysanthemums I told Wright to hang up. Daisies! I have a great dislike for daisies. Every hedgerow has daisies!’

Mistress Elftyn’s voice could be heard remonstrating with the housekeeper while Mistress Baytes and her niece removed their sunbonnets and sat down in the sitting room.

‘I do not care if the brownie will have wildflowers, I tell you I will not have daisies as a house decoration!’

‘My love,’ came Master Elftyn’s voice, ‘I beg you would not offend the brownie.’

‘Who is mistress here, Master E? I ask you that. Who is mistress over the domestic arrangements?’

‘Why, you, my love, it is—’

‘As mistress of this house I say that any flowers hung on my door or arranged in vases are to be to my direction. Take them down, Wright.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Mistress Baytes when Mistress Elftyn came in and took her seat. ‘I hope your brownie will not take offence. We do not have a brownie, our rooms being only part of the larger house below. The house below has a brownie, of course, but we have only Patty, who is a very good girl, she has been with us for many years now, hardly a girl, for she has been with us since Jane was a little baby. She makes a wonderful pie crust and a marvellous apple dumpling, Patty, that is, not Jane. I do not think Jane ever made a dumpling, did you, my dear?’

‘Do not talk to me of dumplings,’ cried Mistress Elftyn. ‘I had an admirer once who would eat nothing but dumplings and I told him frankly, I said, Master Spatchcock, you have many nice qualities, I am sure, but I cannot marry a man who only eats dumplings. And that was the end of *that* little courtship.’

‘Dear me,’ said Mistress Baytes with a nervous laugh. ‘It does seem rather excessive to only eat dumplings, though Patty’s are so very good, I’m sure I could eat them almost every day. Jane is not so fond of them, however, are you dear? Jane thinks them a little heavy, though Patty’s are very light, I assure you. Oh! Dear me! What was that?’

There came a dreadful banging and clattering, as though pots and pans were being thrown about the kitchen. Mistress Wright’s head thrust round the door, looking very agitated.

‘If you please, ma’am, the brownie is leaving if the meadow flowers are not put back up. She says it were bad enough to see you wearing fairy green this day, but she’ll not put up with this as well.’

‘Then let her leave,’ said Mistress Elftyn. ‘We have no need of a brownie. We are a modern household now.’

The housekeeper looked appalled. ‘But, ma’am. ’Tis dreadful bad luck to lose one’s brownie, I for one could not stay in a house without one.’

‘Augusta, my love,’ Master Elftyn appealed, ‘let us be gracious and permit the brownie to have her way with the flowers this one night of the year. It is of great importance to them in this part of the country.’

‘Upon my word!’ cried his wife. ‘You would take the part of an upstart, ugly little fairy over your own wife! Well, I never would have thought it! If I had known when we were courting, Master E, that one day you would value the wishes of a servant over your own wife, I am quite sure I—’

There was a sound of crockery smashing and all manner of crashes and blows.

‘Oh, my!’ cried the housekeeper. ‘She must have heard you. She will be gone directly!’

‘Then good riddance,’ said Mistress Elftyn. ‘And if she has broken my best tea things, I shall have her hairy hide for a doormat!’

The housekeeper gasped in horror and said she would get her things and be off. She was not going to stay one minute in a house where a brownie had been driven out, for nothing would ever go right in it.

There was a good deal of bustle as Mistress Elftyn followed the housekeeper out to try and dissuade her from leaving, or at the very least to make the tea before she went.

Then Master Abdy, the chief ostler at the Crown, came in to speak with Master Elftyn about something he considered important, and when the housekeeper was heard to say that she would hire a place in the coach to leave Highbury altogether and go to her sister’s house in Kingston, Master Abdy told her that there was no coach leaving that night, for there were no horses to be had, for a great black witch’s horse had gone tearing through the village, causing the stable hobs to go wild and undo all the doors, so that every horse and pony and mule in the village had shot off towards Gypsy Woods. It was Midsummer madness, to be sure.

And if that wasn’t enough of a story, the rider on this witch’s horse was none other than Master Frank Charmall, who was seen clinging to its mane, with no saddle nor harness, probably bound on with darkling magic, for he looked as ill as one could expect to look when one was being dragged off by a witch’s creature. Poor fellow. Likely it was vengeance for that witch he shot down. It was all very well to go shooting down witches, very brave and all, but it did not do to rile their tempers. Poor young fellow, likely it was the last time anything would be seen of him.

Jane Fairfayce made a strange little cry at this news, and her aunt was all alarm at seeing her niece swoon. Smelling salts and water were called for immediately.

‘Strange things happen on Midsummer Night, to be sure,’ Master Abdy said wisely. ‘All comes up and out into the light on Midsummer Night, so the saying goes. While the fairies dance, the world’s askance, so another saying goes. You’d best get some lanterns put up and some herbs and such hung out over the door,’ he advised Master Elftyn. ‘’Tis a mark of respect,

and will keep ill humour at bay, for tonight's the night that all things are reckoned up in Faerie. They take kindly to daisies, one of their favourites.'

The ostler left and Mistress Elftyn returned with smelling salts for Jane.

'What a deal of dreadful things have happened,' fretted Mistress Baytes. 'Poor Jane falling ill, and poor Master Charmall, the most obliging young man imaginable, where can he have been carried off to? And yourself being attacked by imps, and now your housekeeper and brownie have left you. What a deal of unpleasantness, I do not think I have ever known such a day!'

'I never much liked Wright,' Mistress Elftyn said waving the salts under Jane's nose, 'I'm sure she did the best she could by Master Elftyn in his bachelor days, but her cooking is a little plain for my liking. I shall have to look for new servants in town, I hardly think I will find good ones hereabouts.

'Have a sip of this, Jane. Lift her head, and I'll put the cup to her mouth. I hear that Mistress Weston has been having trouble with her young maid. She mopes around as though pining away for something or someone, all pale and pensive. An unrequited lover, no doubt.

'That is the trouble with some young women, they allow their feelings to run away with them and if they should set their heart upon a knave or a puppy or a peacock they are left in absolute disarray. I am a very sensitive person, I assure you, but I should never dream of letting my feelings set me in disarray and go about moping and pining and fainting away. I think it quite a sign of affectation. I have quite a horror of affectation.'

'I must go,' Jane moaned, turning her face away from Mistress Elftyn's salts. She tried to sit up.

'My dear Jane,' exclaimed Mistress Baytes. 'You must rest a little. We shall go home as soon as you are well enough.'

'I cannot delay, Aunt,' said Jane, managing to raise herself up. 'I must go.'

'You must rest a half hour at least,' said Mistress Elftyn. 'I shall see if Wright left any of her broth jelly in the pantry. A spoon of that will revive you wonderfully. What an ungrateful servant she is, to be sure, and I let her have her way in everything. I was not one of those new mistresses who come into a house and demand that everything be done differently. I let her do just as she had always done, I made very few alterations, and this is how she repays me. Do take another sip, Jane. But Wright was always so close

with the fae. I should have known not to put any confidence in one who regards the fae as she did. It does no good to show them so much attention, it quite goes to their heads. And to think that I married a man with such a fae-sounding name. Selina was so surprised when she learned the name of my beau. She thought very well of Master E, she thought he tied his cravats beautifully, but I could almost wish we could change our surname, modernise it a bit, Alton or something of that sort. How does Ellington sound?’

Neither Jane nor her aunt answered. Jane refused any more water and got to her feet, looking a little fae and wild with her grey eyes large and glistening in her pale face and her expression one of deep passion.

Mistress Elftyn’s coachman now arrived to say that Dame Baytes had not been at home, and Patty had said she had gone to Hartfield and not come back.

‘Master Woodhouse will send her home in the carriage,’ Mistress Baytes said on hearing this news. ‘We need not worry for Mother if she is with Master Woodhouse, he will always take good care of his friends. I hope she is having a pleasant time. How sorry she will be to hear you have not been well, Jane. And how sorry she will be to hear about poor Master Charmall. She thought very highly of Master Charmall.’

‘You cannot go without that promised cup of tea,’ Mistress Elftyn announced, and rang the little bell to call for it. Then looked dismayed as she realised that there was no one in the kitchen to answer.

‘Or perhaps a glass of wine? None of that rustic mead, I assure you, we have an excellent store of foreign wine in the pantry. Would you bring the wine, my love? What do you mean there are no glasses? What, all of them broken? The bottles too! Well this is too bad! This is Midsummer madness, to be sure! I knew it would be so. Selina warned me I would meet with trouble if I must live so close to the border. But where are you going, Jane?’

‘I’m sorry, Aunt,’ cried Jane. ‘I will see you very soon, I hope. But I must go.’

‘Go where, my dear?’ cried Mistress Baytes. But Jane had fled as though for her life, and in her wake a great clap of thunder sounded, despite the clear blue sky. The sound roared about the house, rattling the door frame and the last of Mistress Elftyn’s pottery on the top shelf of the dresser.

QUEST

Master Knightly could have crossed the common to reach Hartfield, but he was anxious to see if the noise and movement of the ground had been felt in the village, so he hurried up the Broadway.

The residents had all heard and felt the quaking; they were out in the streets pointing up at the sky in the direction of Hartfield and exclaiming over what they saw, or that what they no longer saw. Master Knightley stopped in his tracks and gaped.

The tower was gone. The ancient tower of Hartfield was gone from the skyline. He blinked, he rubbed his eyes, wondering if this were some new spell or trick.

It was not easy to run as fast as one could with a sword at one's side, but Master Knightley ran with vigour enough that everyone in the street moved out of his way. The Hartfield servants were outside, staring up at where the tower ought to have been.

‘Was anyone in it?’ cried Master Knightley.

‘I don’t believe so, sir,’ replied the butler.

‘Where is the Master and Mistress?’ was Master Knightley’s next question, he was hurrying into the house even as he spoke.

‘I believe them to be in the Hall, sir,’ called the butler after him. ‘We can’t go in, for the magic is too heavy.’

The magic was so heavy, it hit Master Knightley as soon as he stepped foot into the ancient wing of the manor. He held fast to the pommel of his sword, feeling some sense of grounding by the touch of it. The power in the fae-made substance of the sword corresponded with the rich green magic

emanating from the Hall, giving him some means of translation between his own mortal senses and the otherworld power.

The door to the hall was slightly ajar. 'Master Woodhouse,' he called. 'Are you there?' He pushed it open to see Master Woodhouse, trembling like a leaf against the wall.

'My dear sir,' cried Master Knightley, stepping over the threshold to reach his friend. 'What is this? And where is Emma?'

'Gone,' was the whispered reply.

Master Knightley did not need to ask where she had gone; the door into the Green Man's lands was open.

The light and music were unlike anything he had ever seen or heard before. There was a word in the music, there was a command. The carved birds were trilling it, the carved leaves were whispering it, the voice of the Green Man was speaking it: '*Come.*'

'You must go, sir,' Master Knightley urged. The Green Man calls you.

'Emma has gone in my place,' said Master Woodhouse. 'I did not wish it. But she would go.'

Master Knightley quelled the words of anger that rose. How could Master Woodhouse let his daughter go alone where only he ought to have gone?

'My dear sir,' he said, with as much calmness of tone as he could muster. 'You cannot mean to let Emma go alone. You are the Guardian. You are the Wild Man, not Emma.'

Master Woodhouse only trembled like a kitten.

'I will go with you,' said Master Knightley. 'We shall join Emma. We must not leave her alone in this. Come now, sir, you shall rally this one time. You *must* rally.'

'It is all too *green*,' whimpered Master Woodhouse.

Master Knightley could see the telltale symptoms of Master Woodhouse sinking into one of his states of insensibility. Meanwhile, the vibration of the Green Man's command resounded through the air; he felt the call through his very bones. He felt a sudden rush of compassion come over him, replacing his anger. 'My dear sir,' he said softly. 'Your wound is so deep it cannot be overcome. It has lingered too long, and you have not the strength now. Your friends must do what they can on your behalf. I shall go in your place, sir.'

'But Emma has gone already.'

‘I shall join her. We shall go together. You must go and rest.’

‘I will wait here. I will watch the door. Emma will come back and I will be watching for her.’

The green magic was strong enough to dispel all usual notions of time. All the usual needs of mortal time, such as sleep and food, seemed of no regard in this place. Master Woodhouse might well remain watching and waiting for years, if need be, and it might be as though he had only waited a day. Master Knightley only hoped it truly would be a short time; what waited beyond the Door, he did not know. Whether he would find Emma beyond it, he also could not know. Whether it was even permissible for him to step through the Door, he was not certain. He might be rousing the displeasure of the Green Man, who was calling for his servant, the Guardian.

But he would go.

He stood in the doorway. The green light fell on him, transforming him from the look of a mortal man to one of a knight, fit for the Faerie court. He took his first full breath of a new air. ‘Oh,’ he exclaimed in quiet surprise. ‘Light is a wonderful thing.’ He stepped beyond and the door closed behind him with a deep, heavy *boom*.



JANE FAIRFAYCE RAN from the Elftyn’s cottage with sobs catching in her throat. She clambered over the stile that led from Green Lane into the common. A lilac sylph danced round her, giving her a little lift to aid her over the stile, calling on a cluster of cowslip and eglantine sprites to hold up the hem of the love-lorn maiden’s gown that she might climb over without tripping over her own skirts. Jane’s shoelace had come loose, and an obliging hawthorn sprite tied it up for her as she crossed the common. The sprites loved a maiden in love on Midsummer Night.

From the common she ran down Donwell Road, veering off into the grassy paths that led past the orchards, down to the river bank. Sylphs and sprites and fairies flew before her, around her, behind her, making a safe passage for the maiden in love. Stones were taken out of her path; tall stalks of nettles and trails of brambles were lifted away that she might suffer no scratch or sting. Nothing must hinder the path of true love on such a night.

At the river bank, Jane stood and stared in dismay. There was no bridge. It was quite gone. She stretched out a long stick to tap at the air where the bridge had once hovered, in hopes that it might linger faintly, but there was nothing.

‘How am I to get across?’ she cried. ‘How shall I find my love?’

‘Swim,’ said a reedy voice. Jane looked down to see a nixie leaning her pale arms on the bank, her green hair streaming behind her on the water.

‘But none can reach the other side,’ said Jane. ‘It is unattainable to mortals.’

‘It is not unattainable to me. I will give you passage.’

Jane looked into the watery eyes of the nixie. She knew full well the fate of those pulled into the nixie’s underwater world.

‘I cannot spare seven years in your kingdom,’ Jane said apologetically. ‘I must find my love before he is lost forever.’

‘Is he your true love?’

‘He is. But the witch of the woods holds him captive.’

The nixie bared sharp, pointy teeth, like that of a pike’s, at the mention of the witch. ‘She put a cousin of mine in her compost,’ she hissed. ‘If you take your true love from the witch, will it hurt her?’

Jane nodded. ‘She will be furious. It will spoil her plans.’

‘Then I will give you passage across my river bed and put you on the other bank.’ The nixie dived into the water in a flash as quick as a diving kingfisher. Her head popped up a few feet away, her hair streaming in the water like strands of weed. ‘Come,’ she called, stretching out a webbed hand.

Jane hesitated. Nixies were not trustworthy as a rule, but there were a whole flock of fairies and sprites on the bank, and they all urged her on. ‘Go, go,’ they called, ‘find your true love on Midsummer Night!’ The sylphs whirled about her head, casting scents of wild thyme and honeysuckle to assuage her fears. Jane took a deep breath, and plunged into the river, and a shoal of minnows rushed to bear her up, while the nixie took hold of Jane’s unravelled hair and tugged her through the icy water, and up the bank on the other side.

Jane stood dripping wet on the edge of the Wild Woods, feeling some reluctance to enter the shadow of the dark trees when she would sooner feel the Midsummer sun on her, drying her hair and gown.

‘Go by the silver paths,’ said the nixie. ‘At the crossroads, ask for the six-league path. It will take you to the house of your true love.’

‘Who do I ask for the six-league path?’ Jane said.

‘Whoever is there to ask. Go quickly. The queen dances when the blue star rises.’ The nixie turned in a dart of green and dived under the water, leaving a trace of bubbles behind.

SMALL BAND OF TRUE FRIENDS

Myrtle relished the feel of the fae-horse's power, bearing them faster than any mortal horse could run. It had leapt the riverbank as easily as if it had wings, and only Harriet's shriek of terror had spoilt the experience.

Myrtle knew that once the horse reached its home, there would be no riding it back into Highbury now that the bridge was gone. But she could not think about that difficulty just now. It was enough of a challenge to find a way to defeat the witch's power, without trying to plan the impossibility of getting home again afterwards; one piece of the puzzle at a time was all she could manage.

She had grown up riding horses on the open moors of her uncle's home, and could ride bareback from childhood. Her uncle had disapproved of such wildness, but he had not forbidden her from riding without side-saddle and suitable attire until she turned thirteen and been deemed no longer a child. But this horse was remarkable indeed. One only had to picture in one's mind, and look to where one wanted to go, and the magnificent beast raced there at a speed so fast it caused the world to pass by in a blur. She had to restrain the horse to only go as fast as the margool could keep up, or his squeals of outrage would pierce her ears as he was left behind. Fortunately, the margool's speed increased remarkably once he was in his native air of Faerie.

Myrtle kept the image of the mushroom fairy's house, just inside the Silver Woods, firmly in place as they thundered along.

'Dear me,' gasped Harriet, when they came to a halt. 'Where are we? How glad I am to stop! My visor would keep flying shut and I could barely

see a thing.'

Myrtle dismounted, impatient with her skirts hampering her, and looked warily at the ground, remembering what had happened the last time she reached this spot. 'Careful,' she said to Harriet, who had clambered down and was clanking about, 'There's a hole around here—'

'Myrtle!' shrieked a voice, and a figure flew at her, throwing a pair of strong arms about her shoulders and dragging her about in a kind of dance.

'*Rue!*' shrieked Harriet, from inside her visor, tugging at the helmet, to pull it off that she might clatter over to greet her friend.

'Look at you!' cried Myrtle, when she was released from Rue's madcap embrace. She stared at Rue, recalling the dreadful state she had been in when last she'd seen her. 'You're well!' She checked Rue's neck. 'And you're free! What happened?'

There was a little volley of high-pitched shrieks, and Myrtle turned to meet the mushroom fairy whose house she had fallen into the first time she had passed this way. She hurried to assure the fairy woman that the margool was not a dragon.

'Of course he's not a dragon,' said the fairy. 'Anyone with eyes can see that, but he's trampling on my elfin saddles!'

'Don't stand on the mushrooms,' Myrtle told the margool. 'Sit still.'

'Now he's sitting on my puffballs!' cried the fairy, pushing her tiny hands in vain at the margool's backside. 'Off! Sit on someone else's garden!'

There was a lot of talking at once and a good deal of leaping and jigging and shouting from Rue as she re-enacted the escape from the witch's house, with a few dramatic flourishes thrown in.

'Ahem,' said a small voice. The three young ladies looked down to see a mushroom fairy with a very smart hat on. 'We must be on our way. Can't be late.'

'These are my very best friends in all the world!' cried Rue. 'This is Sister Myrtle, and this is Sister Harriet, and this is Master and Mistress Neaf, and what are you doing here?'

'We came to rescue you!' said Harriet. 'And to stop the witch! She's got Frank Charmall, and she's trying to get control of the Door at Highbury, and she's threatened Jane Fairfayce and Mistress Woodhouse, and we don't know what's she's going to do next, but I daresay she won't ever stop causing trouble!'

‘She’s still up to her tricks, is she?’ said Rue, sharing a sober look with the fairies. ‘Who’s Frank Charmall and Jane Fairfayce?’

‘We’ll explain later,’ said Myrtle. ‘I need your friends’ help.’ She unwrapped the manuscript she had kept tucked inside the front of her gown for safekeeping. ‘Do you know what this means?’ she asked the mushroom fairies. ‘It’s to do with fungi and their properties. Is there any clue here as to the witch’s source of power?’

Rue and the fairies gathered closer to look, but the fairies both gave a little hiss and drew back at the sight of the writing and drawings.

‘That’s a foul language if ever I saw one,’ said the husband. ‘I’ve seen such things in that prison-house of hers.’ He shuddered and turned away.

‘Looks like a heap of spiders crawling about,’ said Rue with distaste. ‘That’s her writing, for sure. Nasty old crone.’ She shuddered also, and rubbed her neck.

‘It only tells what we already know,’ said the mushroom wife. ‘That the source of her power is deathcaps. That’s why she’s known as Dame Deathcap.’

‘Her name!’ said Myrtle. ‘Frank Charmall said that her power was in her name. Where are these deathcaps? If we destroy them, will that destroy her power?’

‘It’s not known where she harvests them,’ said the husband. ‘They weren’t grown in the black garden. She would bring a supply of them with her.’

‘I burnt that little stock,’ said Rue with some satisfaction. ‘So if we find her source and destroy all of ‘em, we’ll bring her down, is that what you’re saying?’

‘Master Charmall said her power is kept behind hidden gates,’ said Myrtle. ‘I don’t know if that means the gates of her house.’

‘End-Has-Come has gates of hornbeam,’ said the husband. ‘Ancient gates from when the house belonged to a knight of the queen’s court. Beyond those gates is said to be a beautiful garden.’

‘So we’ve to get into her house and garden and find the hidden gates,’ said Rue. ‘Open ‘em up and destroy the deathcaps. Is that the plan?’

‘And rescue Master Charmall,’ added Harriet.

‘Gates can be heavy,’ said the fairy-wife. ‘We might need someone strong to open them.’

‘I know who to ask,’ said her husband. ‘I’ll send a message to Berch.’

‘There might be others,’ his wife said. ‘Many would wish to see Dame Deathcap get her dues.’

‘I’ll send the word to all who dwell within an hour’s flight,’ said the fairy. He pulled out a music pipe and trilled a message. Within minutes every silvery tree and every shrub was filled with birds: purple finches, gold-sparrows, rainbow-starlings, silver fantails, owls with eyes as big as two-penny buns. They all gathered to the fairy’s call.

‘I didn’t realise he was such a big chief about here,’ Rue said to the fairy wife. ‘He’s no ordinary fairy, is he?’

‘Of course he’s not,’ said the fairy wife proudly. ‘He’s the oldest, wisest mushroom fairy in all of Silver Woods.’

‘What’s he telling ‘em?’ Rue asked, delighted by the cacophony of song and squawk and cooing and trilling and by all the colours of the fae birds. The margool was flapping his wings and adding his own squawks.

‘You’re not a songbird,’ Myrtle reminded him. ‘Stop flapping and be quiet, no one can hear over your shrieks.’

When the mushroom fairy finished his pipe playing, there was a great whooshing sound, as though the East Wind had rushed through bringing a gale in her train. All the birds lifted in one accord and flew away, some rising above the canopy, some flitting and darting away through the trees.

‘That’s the word sent round,’ said the fairy, pocketing his pipe with satisfaction. He rubbed his hands. ‘This is going to be an interesting Midsummer.’

‘What about them merciful mushrooms?’ Rue said. ‘They did wonders at weakening her power.’

‘There’s not many left,’ said the fairy wife. ‘We’ve been feeding them to you for weeks.’

‘So you have,’ said Rue. ‘But even a few would help, wouldn’t they?’

‘We could ask our neighbours,’ the wife said to her husband. ‘See what stores they’ve got. Frilled candlesnuffers would be good. They have excellent potency against darkling power.’

‘Ladycaps,’ added the husband, ‘and wish-pennys.’

‘And blessed blewits,’ said the wife.

‘A blend of all of them would make a good strong powder.’

‘Our neighbours will all be setting off for Court.’

‘We’d best get round to them quickfoot, then.’

‘Call the woodland folk to the ring,’ said his wife.

The fairy husband put the pipe back to his lips and a low note sounded, sending a vibration through the air. Every leaf, every twig, every mushroom quivered in response, and fairies appeared in tree-trunk doors and out of holes in the earth and from under shrubs. The three Sisters watched as the forms of doors and windows and habitations showed themselves. Where there had seemed to be only woodland, there was a whole village full of hidden inhabitants.

‘To the ring!’ called the fairy husband. The fairies vanished, leaving the Sisters staring at the place where they had been. ‘They do that sometimes,’ said Rue. ‘Up and disappear. Or down and disappear. They can pass through earth and so on, being earth guardians. I think the ring is like the village square back at Highbury.’

‘I hope they’re quick,’ said Myrtle. ‘We need to get going before the day’s over.’



EMMA WAS IN A FOREST, beneath towering trees. But then she looked again and she was in a palace, with walls as fir trees and a ceiling of dark green leaves and cones and flowers and the smell of pine sap filling her senses, and she realised that pine was the smell of vigorous life.

In *The Dictionary of Smells*, Harriet had once brought round to study, it had said pine was the scent of hardiness, but it was wrong. It was deeper than that. It was richer and more complex: growth and life and cleanness and uprightness. She felt as though she were learning a new language just in experiencing the smell of Faerie pine. It was very interesting, so she remained quite still, listening and feeling the air against her skin and wondering why she had ever thought sensing practise so difficult and tedious. Here it was so easy.

She could sense the mood of the wind, feel the movement of the roots beneath the forest floor, taste the drops of light vibrating in the air. She did not know how long she stood there, it could have been minutes, it could have been days, but gradually she became aware of another presence, and in unhurried movements she began to explore the forest palace where she found herself.

The Green Man was everywhere. She looked at a row of trees and it was a wall, carved with the Green Man's face, and the bark of the trees was the dark brown of the Green Man's eyes blinking slowly at her. She looked up at the canopy of trees above her head and it was a vaulted ceiling, studded with gilt stars, and then it was the Green Man's coat, twinkling with dewdrops as he moved. She listened to the birdsong in the branches and it was a Faerie choir, and then it was the voice of the Green Man telling an old, old story of how the forest grew.

Emma wandered through glades that were chambers, through close rows of trees that were hallways, drank from pools that were fountains, watched the anemones unfurl their petals, which were forest fairies in their dancing gowns.

She walked through the forest palace, learning the true meaning of the senses. But at some hour of the day, though what hour it was, Emma could not have said, the Green Man's face spoke to her. His voice came from the mistletoe wreathing the golden apple trees; it was time to fulfil her duty as his servant, and to aid those who needed it. The trees drew aside, and a green path stretched beyond. Emma stepped into the many-league path, feeling no sickness, for she had absorbed enough green magic to keep her on such a road. She took a step, and the forest fell away.



MASTER KNIGHTLEY FOUND himself in a fortress of wood and green. Tree trunks, sturdy and straight, kept guard, their lances stout, their shields sure. Green was fiercely protective, jealous in its regard for life, powerful in hope, strong in perseverance. Master Knightley felt the responsibility that his ancestors had held in a way that history books could never tell him; now he understood their passion in guarding all that was good, taking up sword against all that would destroy life. But he knew likewise that growing fields of green grass and crops in a time of peace was just as vital.

Master Knightley met the Green Man in a thicket of holly and hornbeam and received his orders to go forth and fulfil the commission

given him. The trees of the thicket parted and the green path lay beyond. Master Knightley did not hesitate, but rushed to meet it.



JANE FAIRFAYCE WALKED AS FAST as she could. A cloud of sprites and fairies flew before her, announcing that true love was passing through, and in the name of the queen it must be given safe passage on such a day.

Hobs and gnomes and elves cleared the ground of tripping roots and sharp stones and snagging briars and darkling imps. Three fae bears sent their roars throughout the woods, warning any darkling foe to keep away from the path, or face their might. Wolves slunk back to their dens, trolls heard the roars and shrank further back into their caves, every biting, stinging, tricky creature held their tongue, stayed their hands, and closed their mouth, for who would dare resist true love on Midsummer Day?

Jane reached the crossroads marked by thorns, and waited, and waited, but no one came to show her the way. Finally she called out, 'Can someone show me the path I seek?' The cloud of fairies hovered like butterflies about her. 'I need the black road, the six-league path.'

The fairies flitted and fussed, anxious that the maiden-in-love should seek the six-league path. They would never venture on such a road. 'You ought not to take that path,' they insisted.

'But I must,' Jane told them. 'That is where my love is.'

'I will show you the way,' said a cold voice. A stone the size of a goose-egg stretched out its neck and unfurled its grey wings, and a black forked tongue flicked out.

'Do not follow him,' cried the fairies and sprites.

'Away with you, Blacktongue!' cried the gnomes and wood elves. 'Back to your stone, you dragon.'

'Why would you help me?' Jane asked.

'Because you seek the mortal whom Deathcap holds.' He flicked his tongue in and out four times. 'She captured my family, used their tongues for her spells, took our treasure for her arts, bound me to a miserable state, and I am the only one left.' Another flick. 'Long have I wished to enter her demesne, in search of my ancestor's magic. Long have I desired to recover what was lost, and return to my homeland in rest.'

‘But we cannot follow you on the black paths!’ cried the fairies and sprites and sylphs. ‘The sorceress has crows that would eat us!’

‘Then I must go alone,’ said Jane.

‘We will carry you, little fairlings,’ said a thin, squeaking voice from the trees above. ‘We will carry you,’ echoed a whole company of high, squeaking voices. ‘We can travel the black paths, and no crow can catch us.’

A cloud of bats shook out their wings from the shadow of the trees.

‘Why would you carry us?’ asked the fairies and sprites.

‘She plucks out our eyes and eats them,’ cried the bats. ‘We want some justice too.’

‘Lead on, Blacktongue,’ said Jane. ‘Show me the way to my love.’

The stone-dragon’s magic opened the path, and Jane took her first step. A cloud of woodland fairies and sprites riding on bats made an escort.

SAD WARFARE

The witch was in her lady's glamour, stomping about her workroom, pulling books down from shelves, rummaging through pages, tossing the books down again, growling with frustration, snatching up scrolls and unrolling them, scanning their contents and tossing them over her shoulder.

'I can't think straight today,' she muttered. 'Can't remember where anything is. Snout!' she bellowed. A brownie with a bond about her brown, hairy neck peered out through a servants' door. 'Where's my spell on True Love? Where have you tidied it away to, you snaggle-toothed wartlehound?'

'True Love?' whispered the brownie, shrinking back. 'I do not know of any such book in your library, mistress.'

'It's not called True Love.' The witch scowled as she tried to recall the name. 'It's about undoing it. False love-juice for the eyes to make a fool hate his true love and fall in love with another.'

'I think it was among the books you took to your woodland house,' the brownie said timidly.

The witch growled as fierce as a werebear, and the brownie trembled. 'Burned up with the rest of my precious works,' snarled the witch. 'I will hunt down that ninny if it's the last thing I do. My spells, my black garden, my whole store of bats' eyes!' She stomped and snarled a little more, and the brownie hid behind the log basket.

'Make me my brew!' said the witch. 'Make it double strength. I've a wretched head today.'

'There is none,' said the brownie from behind the basket.

'What?'

‘The deathcap box is empty, mistress. You were to refill it yesterday.’

Another roar and bellow and stamping of the feet. ‘Show yourself, you fur-bellied good-for-nothing! You should have reminded me this morning!’

The witch gathered up magic in her fingers, where it crackled and flashed, and the brownie, knowing that the basket would not protect it from a bolt of magic, dropped to its knees and knew its end had come.

‘*Scrawk!*’ came a screech from the stone-arched window and the startled witch whirled round, the magic flying from her hand to strike a shelf full of jars and skulls, and exploding the prized potted black-spotted-butterfly-eating-lily.

‘My lily!’ shrieked the witch. She threw another bolt of magic at the window, enraged at the crow that had startled her, but the crow squawked and flapped away, and a corner of the window frame was blasted into rubble.

‘What’s going on?’ said the voice of the witch’s great-great nephew, standing at the doorway, his face pale and drawn. ‘Are you under attack?’ he said hopefully. The brownie saw its chance, and pushed past his legs, disappearing down the hall with soft padded steps.

‘Get out of my chamber,’ the witch snarled. ‘Who said you could leave your room? I’ve a mind to put you in the dungeon, you swamp-toad, dragon-tongued, traitorous ingrate!’

‘We don’t have a dungeon, Auntie,’ said Frank. He leaned wearily against the door frame; the ride home on the crow-horse had been bone-jarring, and his neck still burned from his aunt’s ministrations of control.

‘Then it’s about time we did.’

Frank looked about the room, noting the disarray and disorder. He had never seen his aunt so bad, but then Midsummer Night was the worst night of the year for her. Usually she journeyed as far from Faerie as she could get at Midsummer, for the rise of royal Faerie power in the air was poisonous to her mind. Even darklings were affected by Midsummer Night and did unaccountable acts, such as dancing in rings, or showing mercy, or giving help to wandering mortals.

‘You spoiled my plans, you faithless varmint, you usurping blockhead. Twenty years I’ve waited for this. Twenty years I’ve cosseted you, turned you into a dandified coxcomb, the kind that ninnies like, and what do you do? Go and ruin all my plans.’

‘I tried, Auntie,’ said Frank. ‘I did everything you made me do. I won them all over, made myself the hero, gained Mistress Woodhouse’s affections and proposed to her. I don’t know what more I could have done.’

‘You plighted your troth with some fair-o-face piece of mutton!’ shouted his aunt. ‘That’s what you did wrong!’

‘Don’t call her names,’ said Frank, drawing himself up, his pale face gaining a little colour as he flushed with anger. ‘Call me all the names you like, but she is perfect and pure and I love her—’

‘You numskull!’ shrieked his aunt. ‘You don’t know what love is!’

‘Yes, I do. It’s the only thing worth living for.’

‘Well, I hope you think it’s worth dying for, because that’s what will happen when I truss you up and drop you in the middle of the Bottomless Swamp.’

Frank had heard this threat too many times to be unduly worried.

‘Auntie, can’t you let this whole vengeance and world domination thing go? It’s a wearisome business this always being angry and evil all the time. It’s quite ruined your skin.’

‘Skin?’

‘Black magic makes for terrible wrinkles.’

His aunt gave him her fiercest scowl.

‘And your teeth, if only you would cease gnashing them.’

His aunt bared her teeth at him.

‘If I could marry my true love, she would live here, and would redecorate everything in the latest style. She has excellent taste, Auntie, she would restore this place to its old glory, and she would play music in the evenings and help you in the gardens, she can arrange posies as well as any flower elf, and you’d have us for family and in due time I daresay there might be some little Franks and Janes running about. Let’s put away all this spell casting and catching helpless creatures and tormenting them. What do you think?’

‘Little Franks and Janes running about?’ said his aunt quietly.

Frank nodded.

‘Little sprogs mewling in my house?’

‘If they take after their mother, they’ll be too perfect to mewl, Auntie.’

‘Little brats trampling through my gardens?’

‘You can teach them all about plants and mushrooms and so forth. Pass on your wisdom. We’ll name our second daughter after you,’ he added.

‘You can be Godmother, if you like.’

His aunt’s face contorted, growing darker and hairier and warty and decrepit as her anger rose up, breaking her glamour.

‘You would have to keep your crone-face away from the babies,’ said Frank, backing a step out of the doorway as his aunt began a low, malevolent growl, and shadows danced about the room. ‘How about we call our *first* daughter after you?’ was Frank’s final offer as his aunt stalked towards him. He turned and fled as she rubbed her black-nailed fingers, and a crackling light gathered.

‘I hate whining, mewling, dirty, fouldsome, boil-bottomed, plague-sore sproggins!’ was the last thing he heard as he fled back to the relative safety of his own wing and bolted the door.



FRANK CHARMALL’S horse bore all three Sisters, and two small mushroom fairies without difficulty. Travelling the six-league path was of no difficulty to him either, but it left its riders feeling sick and dizzy when he deposited them at the gates of the Charmall manor house. The mushroom fairy insisted they all take a tiny pinch of the mushroom powder they had brought; their neighbours had been generous in supplying all that they had by way of fungi with properties antagonistic to darkling magic.

‘It looks like Dust,’ said Harriet, taking up a pinch of powder and putting it under her tongue, as directed.

‘Oh, for Fairy Dust,’ sighed Rue. ‘I miss all the fun we used to have with Dust.’

The powder was pungent and odd tasting, but it worked, and they could stand up without their heads spinning or their stomachs lurching.

The gates before them were of hornbeam wood with elven-carving work of flowers and butterflies and stars with the words *Ease-Comely* carved in elaborate script.

‘How are we going to get in without being seen?’ Harriet asked. ‘We can’t go marching through the front gate in broad daylight. She might be waiting on the other side. She might have used some divination thing and seen us coming. Should we wait until it’s dark?’

‘We can’t wait till nightfall,’ said the mushroom fairies. ‘ ’Tis Midsummer Night. We must get on with vanquishing this witch’s power and make haste to Court.’

‘There must be another way in,’ said Myrtle. ‘There’s always a servants’ gate to these big houses. My uncle’s house has four entrances.’

‘This way,’ called the mushroom fairy, beckoning to them. ‘There’s a garden gate.’

The smaller gate was marked with the words *End-Has-Come*, carved in a script that looked more childlike than elven. A second sign hung beneath it stating: *Enter at thy Peril*. Other words were scratched onto it, as though someone was determined to leave a warning: *Go Far Away or Never Return Home*.

‘This looks welcoming,’ said Rue.

‘It’s telling the truth,’ said the fairy. ‘Which tells me that it’s the best gate to go through.’

‘Are we really doing this?’ Rue said to the fairy, a moment of hesitation seizing her. ‘After everything we went through, we’re going to head right into her garden?’ She blew out a long breath as though expelling her doubts.

‘You’ve had enough of my wife’s soup to make you brave enough for anything,’ said the fairy gravely.

‘You can borrow my sword,’ Harriet offered. ‘I don’t think I could actually kill anything with it anyhow. My shield’s enough.’

‘I’ve got a knife about me somewhere,’ said Rue, fishing in her pocket. ‘Belongs to you,’ she said, holding out Myrtle’s knife to her.

‘My knife!’ Myrtle took it back. ‘I didn’t think to see that again. It belonged to my mother’s family.’

Rue took up the sword, Myrtle had her knife, Harriet gripped her shield. The fairies bore a goodly amount of ground mushrooms in a little bag.

‘So what are we waiting for?’ said Rue, when no one moved nearer to the forbidden door. ‘I’ve got me courage up now, I’m ready to get this over with before I lose it again.’ She raised her sword.

‘We don’t really have a plan,’ said Harriet. ‘Do we?’ She looked at Myrtle.

‘Why are you all looking at me?’ Myrtle said. ‘I don’t know what’s on the other side of that door any more than you do. Here’s what I do know from reading that book and from what you’ve told me: the witch gets her dark power from deathcaps. If the source of her power is in there, behind

hidden gates, I'm guessing it's something to do with growing deathcaps, so we need to find it, whatever it is, and destroy it. Her power isn't unending. It's reliant on her keeping it renewed.'

'So, if we can make her throw her magic about,' said Rue, 'it will weaken her.'

'We should divide up,' said the mushroom fairy. 'Half of us will search for the power source, while the others keep guard and draw her away, and hope she uses up her magic.'

'I don't know that any of us could last more than one of her blasts,' said Rue, recalling the last encounter she'd suffered.

'I would be protected in my armour and shield,' said Harriet in a small voice, as though she did not entirely believe this. 'So, I ought to be part of the stand-guard group.'

'The margool can help me see through spells, if these hidden gates are concealed by magic,' said Myrtle. 'So I'll be on the search group.'

'We'll come with you,' said the fairies. 'We can smell out deathcaps within a half mile.' His wife wrinkled her nose. 'Nasty smelling things they are,' she said.

'Harriet can't go alone,' said Rue. 'I'll go with her.'

'What about Berch and the others?' the fairy wife asked her husband.

'They may have left for Court before the message reached them,' said the fairy. 'We can't expect any help from anyone. We can only hope.'

'It's just us then,' said the fairy wife.

'It's just us,' said Rue, lifting her sword. Harriet lifted her shield and closed her visor; Myrtle called the margool to her side. The fairies clutched their bag. The group took a deep breath, and Myrtle reached for the latch on the gate.

SUBSTANCE & SHADOWS

The garden was empty. Myrtle released her breath and beckoned to the others to follow her. 'No noise,' she told the margool. 'No flying, no talking, no chasing anything.'

They made their way cautiously through the passage of tall, clipped hedges, their weapons and shield raised up, as they listened and looked for any other creatures.

The passage turned at a right angle, and they carried on, single file, down another narrow passage made of dense, dark evergreen.

Another turn, and another, and then came a fork in the path, both ways identical.

'We're in a maze,' said Myrtle, halting at the fork in the path.

'Then we've got to find our way out,' said Rue. 'It's a game.'

'It's a sorceress's maze,' Myrtle reminded her. 'I don't think she's put it here for our entertainment.'

'No. She never had much of a sense of humour,' said Rue.

'We'll be here forever,' said the mushroom fairy. 'We should have heeded the signs on the gate.'

'It were you who said they were truthful, so we ought to come this way,' said Rue.

'Let's not argue,' begged Harriet. 'See if you can cut through the hedge, Rue.'

Rue obliged, by slashing at the hedge with Lady Stormont's sword. 'It's made a gap,' she said with satisfaction. 'Will take a few cuts to break right through.'

‘Don’t you understand?’ said the mushroom fairy. ‘It’s a *sorceress’s* maze. You can cut through as many walls as you like, but you won’t find the way out. The spell on the maze won’t let you find it.’

‘Don’t say we’re foiled at the first fence,’ groaned Rue.

‘Shall we go back the way we came and find another door?’ Harriet suggested.

‘Good luck finding your way back,’ said the fairy.

‘So what do we do?’ Harriet said.

Myrtle frowned, a sure sign she was thinking hard. ‘If we can’t get out by sight,’ she said slowly, ‘because the maze is made up of spelled walls, not natural ones, then we get out by using something other than natural sight.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Harriet

‘We sense our way out!’ said Rue. ‘Like the sensing game we play with the girls at school.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Harriet, ‘I was never very good at that game.’

‘You was always the best at sensing,’ Rue said to Myrtle. ‘You lead the way. Let’s all join up, so no one gets left behind.’

Hands were clasped to make a chain. ‘Eyes closed,’ Myrtle ordered. ‘Let’s focus on a proverb for a minute to clear our thoughts. Someone give me a proverb.’

‘I don’t know if I can remember any while I’m so frightened,’ said Harriet.

‘That’s exactly why we need one,’ said Myrtle. ‘We can’t sense straight if we’re only thinking about the problem.’

‘*Fear will blow your candle out,*’ offered Rue.

‘I wish I could remember one,’ said Harriet. ‘There’s a nice one I like about love being strong, but I can’t remember how it goes...’

‘*Darkness gives us stars,*’ offered the mushroom fairy.

‘*And food,*’ added his wife. ‘That’s the second part.’

‘Only applicable to us, though, dear.’

‘*Ain’t no adventures in a safe harbour,*’ quoted Rue. ‘Or is that *journeys?*’

‘I don’t know that I like adventures very much,’ said Harriet.

‘We’ll go with the first one,’ said Myrtle. ‘Eyes closed everyone. *Fear will not blow our candle out.*’

There was almost silence.

‘Harriet, just say it in your head, not out loud,’ Myrtle said.

‘Sorry.’

‘Harriet, you’re still whispering.’

‘Sorry. I’ll put my visor down.’

‘Oh, Harriet, I have missed you and your terrible sensing practice!’ Rue laughed.

‘I’ve missed you too, Rue, and your terrible spells.’

‘Can we focus, please?’ said Myrtle.

‘Sorry.’ There was a *ting* as Harriet dropped her visor.

Myrtle found that if she recalled the feelings she had while in the Green Lady’s palace, it enabled her to get into the state of quiet awareness she needed at that moment. She needed to stretch out with her senses and feel where the true walls of the maze were, not where her eyes showed her they were. She needed to see past the lie that was the witch’s spell.

Slowly she gained a sense of the wall, could step towards it, could smell the woody yew-like foliage. She took a step, gently tugging Harriet behind her, aware that the margool was at her side. If she put her hand on his head, it increased her sensing by twofold. Step by step, occasionally distracted for a moment by Harriet’s clinking or the sense that there was something unfriendly watching them, she led them on until she could sense no more walls.

‘We’re out, ain’t we?’ said Rue. ‘I could feel it.’

‘Oh, how beautiful,’ said Harriet, lifting her visor to see green lawns stretching away into flower beds and bowers and vistas of more gardens.

‘Who would have thought that a nasty old witch could live in someplace like this,’ marvelled Rue. ‘And it ain’t even a glamour, is it?’ She squinted to see if there was a telltale shimmer of a glamour around the edges of the view.

‘It’s real enough,’ said the mushroom fairy.

‘ ’Tis a bit bright for my eyes,’ said his wife. ‘I like green as well as any woodland fairy, but I do like a good canopy to keep things cool. That Midsummer sun is hot as can be.’

‘It looks to be mid-afternoon,’ Myrtle noted.

‘Then we’d best get along,’ said the fairy wife. ‘We’ve to be at Court before nightfall.’

‘If we make it out of here,’ said her husband, taking his wife’s hand and squeezing it.

‘Course we will,’ said Rue. ‘I ain’t offering to go back into slavery to that twisty hag, that’s for sure.’

‘Let’s split up as planned,’ said Myrtle. She had been scanning the grounds for any building that might hold gates. ‘You’re right about it being too bright here,’ she said to the fairy wife. ‘She wouldn’t grow deathcaps in direct sunlight, would she?’

‘Certainly not,’ said the fairy. ‘Somewhere shady and moist.’

‘Can you follow your nose,’ said Myrtle?

‘If there are mushrooms about, I’ll find them,’ the fairy promised.

‘Let’s keep out of sight of the house,’ said Myrtle. ‘We’ll go behind that line of trees.’

‘We’ll head towards the house and hide where we can see who’s coming in an’ out,’ said Rue. ‘If she comes out and is going after you, we’ll distract her.’

‘Try to get her to cast her magic,’ the fairy wife reminded Rue. ‘Then we’ll know she’s empty of big magic. Any fairy can withstand small magic.’

‘But don’t let it hit you,’ the fairy husband added.

‘Ready, Harriet?’ said Rue.

Harriet nodded, but her shield was quivering as she shook with fear.

‘Fear will put your candle out, remember?’ Rue said, holding up her sword like a candle.

Harriet nodded again, but the shield still shook.

‘How COME you’re not scared, Rue?’ Harriet asked, as they took up position behind the fall of a willow tree’s curtain. ‘You were in her power. Aren’t you scared of what she can do?’

‘Course I’m scared.’

‘But your teeth aren’t chattering. I can’t make mine stop. I thought wearing this armour made be braver, but now I’m not sure.’ Harriet clutched her shield closer.

‘It’s an odd thing,’ said Rue, peering through the fronds of leaves. ‘But when I thought my time was up, when I was laid there on the ground and the witch were about to kill me with another of them nasty bolts of magic, it was like I knew I didn’t need to be afraid of nothing anymore. ‘Cause, really, what’s the worst that can happen?’

‘You can die,’ said Harriet. ‘That’s the worst thing.’

‘Well, I looked death in the face, and it weren’t so bad.’

‘It wasn’t?’

‘Not if you’ve got them that loves you waiting for you in that place you go when you die. It’s just like going home to family.’

‘I don’t have any family,’ said Harriet. ‘I don’t have anyone who loves me anywhere but in Highbury. I would be afraid to die and go where no one loves me.’

‘That’s the other thing I found when I was looking death in the eye, so to speak. There was this brightness about the place, and it was good and kind and I knew it loved me. Even if I hadn’t seen my gran there waiting for me, I’d feel like I was going somewhere I was loved.’

Harriet thought about this with enough concentration for her teeth to cease chattering. ‘It doesn’t sound so very bad when you talk about it like that.’

‘But I got to live for a reason,’ Rue said. ‘I have a knowing that I’m here for some big adventures, and I’m not going to let being frightened of a rotten old crone keep me from them. She’s kept too many folks from living the adventures they was meant to live, and I’m not standing for it if I can do ought to help it. It makes me right mad to think of all the trouble she’s caused.’

‘You’re so brave,’ said Harriet wistfully. ‘I’d rather not have big adventures. I don’t mind little ones, like picnics and dances, and learning to fish, but I like being safe at home with people about me. It’s been the worst thing ever with the school all empty, and no one to talk to. Except Cloe-Claws and the sprites, of course. But I’ve missed people so much.’

‘You poor little lamb,’ said Rue. ‘I never thought about you being there all alone. But you’ve done right good at managing it.’

‘I’ve done the best I can.’

‘You’ve been right brave in looking after things on your own. As brave as any of us.’

Harriet was silent again as she considered this.

‘Blundering Bearcubs,’ said Rue softly. ‘Here she comes. We’ve got us a witch to distract, Harriet.’



THERE WAS another squawk at the window. 'What is it?' said the witch, stalking to the window. Her crow alighted cautiously and cawed its message.

'How many?' the witch demanded. The crow gave three croaks and two half croaks and one hiss. 'What do you mean three and two halves and a foul bird?' said the witch. 'Can't you count, you feather-brain? There's no such thing as a half body. Were there five intruders and some bird creature, or were there four?'

The crow took offence at the name calling and turned its back to her.

'Where are they, these three and two halves and a bird?' said the witch. 'Don't be sulking with me, or I'll turn your tail feathers into a rabbit tail again.' She took up a jar containing the transformation spells she had been working on that morning. Six globules of something squirmy and wriggling jostled in the jar.

The crow gave his answer in as terse a sentence as he could.

'Well, they won't be getting out of the maze any time soon,' said the witch with satisfaction. 'Seems I've got myself a few new servants. Or compost fodder.' Her eager gleam was replaced with a grimace. 'Suppose I ought to wait till the morrow to deal with them. I'm not at my best today. Pesky Midsummer magic is too high.' She rubbed her warty chin as she considered this. 'I could do with something to cheer me, however. That useless wallydraigle boy ruining my plans has put me out of humour.' An idea came to her. 'Was there a dark-haired fair-o-face ninny among the trespassers?'

The crow answered in the negative. He could have given a good deal more information about who had come, but he was still piqued at being called a feather-brain and reminded of the shame he'd felt at having a bobtail for a whole week. He was a proud creature, and he'd lost a good deal of credibility among the fae-crows over that.

'Shame,' muttered the witch. 'She's the first one I'll be turning into something with a tail. Let's see if my dandy of a nephew won't change his mind about her when his true love is a hairy rat. He'll be a bit quicker about taking up with the long-haired ninny he's supposed to be matched with.'

She turned from the window and considered her options. 'I can go and have a look at the fool snollygosters who've dared to trespass in my gardens.' She eyed the small jar of transformation spells. 'I can have a bit of sport. See how they like being pygmy goats, spending all night trying to eat

their way out of my maze in vain.' She chuckled and pocketed the jar of spells.

SCHEME, HOPES, CONNIVANCE

‘These grounds go on forever,’ said Myrtle. All her vague imaginings of slipping into the witch’s garden, spying out the place of her treasure, and quickly destroying it seemed foolish now. It wasn’t a garden, it was an estate, even bigger than her uncle’s.

‘Let’s ask someone,’ said the mushroom fairy.

‘We can’t ask someone,’ said Myrtle, amazed at such a ridiculous idea. ‘We’re not supposed to be here.’

‘There are gnomes at work,’ said the fairy. ‘And they’re worked hard, judging by these grounds, and I’ll warrant they’re not here by their own choosing.’

His wife nodded agreement. ‘They’ll be bonded to her, and if it’s one thing gnomes hate, it’s being bonded. They like to choose where they work.’

‘That doesn’t mean they can talk to intruders,’ argued Myrtle. ‘They might be forced to be loyal to her.’

Both fairies snorted at such an idea. ‘Gnomes forced to loyalty,’ said the husband. ‘Their loyalty is to the earth.’

‘And they won’t take kindly to having poisonous deathcaps in their gardens,’ said the wife.

‘We’ve walked at least a mile, and I haven’t seen a single gnome,’ said Myrtle.

‘They haven’t let you see them,’ said the fairy. ‘Let me just have a word.’ With that he drew out his pipe and put it to his lips to play a run of low earthy notes.

The notes sank down into the earth, and all was quiet. Myrtle looked around, but could see nothing but a gentle nodding of some yellow larkspurs and blue foxgloves, twice the height of any she had seen in England. A blackbird trilled to their right. 'This way,' said the fairy.

'How do you know?' said Myrtle, but the fairy had set off in the direction of the birdcall. She marvelled at how fast such a small being could move as she stretched to her full stride to follow.

A few trills and a few more turns and they entered a garden with fruit growing up a sunny wall. 'In here,' said a low voice, and a gnome beckoned from an arbour of hanging grapes. The gnome looked anxiously up at the sky as they entered under the vines. He made a bow before the mushroom fairy. 'Honoured to meet you, Lord Silver.'

Myrtle's eyebrows lifted in surprise. She looked at the fairy with new appreciation.

'We are here on a quest, good fellow,' said the fairy. 'We seek the place where the deathcaps grow.'

The gnome shuddered. 'Darkness foul are they, and they grow in no earth that we care to till.'

'We're here to destroy them. Help us, and you'll gain your freedom.'

The gnome stared in disbelief. 'None can destroy them,' he said.

'I am Lord of the Silver Woods, Chief over all mushroom fairies.' The fairy drew himself up and a new dignity shone out from the little man. 'There is none in all the kingdom who knows how to destroy that foul crop but me. And my good wife,' he added, as his wife gave him a nudge. 'Now direct us to it, my good fellow. When the witch's power is ended, you shall till these grounds for a fair master, or gain your freedom to till where you will.'

'I fear you do not know the depth of her power,' said the gnome.

'None knows the depth of her wickedness more than me,' said the fairy. 'Well I know what it is to be bonded to her dark will.'

'You were bonded to her? And now you walk free?'

'As you see.'

'And yet you have come into her own demesne, where she will have the lawful right to do with you as she wills for your trespass?'

'I should like to see such a claim stand up in the Court of the queen,' cried the fairy. 'Long years has she robbed me of my freedom, it is she who owes *me*. Now on this night of Her Majesty's reckoning, I say this day is

the witch's day of judgement. What say you? Will you aid me, in the name of the Green Man o' the East, and the Green Lady o' the West, and Her Majesty, who sits in the heart of Faerie? What say you?'

There was a little ripple of cheers, and a lawn of gnomes peered out from behind urns and garden walls and fruit bushes.

'Hush, the crows shall hear us,' said the first gnome.

'I say we help 'em,' said a younger gnome.

'Show 'em the way,' added another.

'Galumphing Greenfly,' hissed the first gnome, 'keep your voices down, old Kroker don't miss a thing!'

'Show 'em the way, Master Cobb,' urged another gnome.

' 'Tis Midsummer,' urged another. 'The housies say she's weak and scatsy today.'

'Housies?' Myrtle asked. 'Scatsy?'

'House servants,' the first gnome supplied. 'Scatsy, you know, not sharp, not strong, not her usual cunning self.'

'Show them the way or I will,' said another gnome. 'I say there's been something in the air all day, speaking of something about to happen.'

'Too true,' agreed another gnome. 'It's in the daisies, their petals are as curled up and pink as can be. A real sign.'

'And there are rumours flying above and beneath. The sparrows say the whole of Silver and Wild Woods are roused up, and the moles and conies say the same.'

'This is encouraging news,' said the fairy wife. 'Come on, Master Cob, do your duty to your queen and show her servant, the Lord of Silver Woods, the way to the den of deathcaps.'

There was a collective shiver from all the gnomes at this word.

'So be it,' said the gnome. 'Follow me. I hope you can see in the dark.'

'Of course we can,' said the fairy wife.

'I've got regular vision,' Myrtle reminded them. She glanced at the margool, who was snapping half-heartedly at dragonflies as they darted by. He was too hot for any vigorous games. 'I'm not sure about him,' she said. 'I think he can see underwater, but I don't know about the dark.'

'Course he can see underwater, he's a margool,' said the gnome. 'And a very fine one too. I thought them extinct.' He looked admiringly at the creature. But his expression soon returned to a downcast one. 'Don't let her see him,' he advised. 'She'll want him for sure.'

‘What do you know about margools?’ Myrtle asked.

But the gnome had turned away. ‘Follow me,’ he said, ‘we’ll go by the badger’s tunnels. Old Kroker can’t see us down there.’



FRANK CHARMALL SAW his aunt walking in an ungainly manner across the lawn. She looked as though she’d been at her waspnettle brandy, the way she lurched from side to side. He was a naturally amiable fellow, but at that moment he detested his aunt and her schemes and her control over his life. All he wanted was to be free of her. Free to be with his sweet Jane. Free to be himself, instead of bearing charms about him to influence people. Free to live as he chose, not bound by a cord round his neck, like an old donkey. Free to go shopping whenever he liked, for his aunt kept his tailoring allowance abominably small.

What could he do to thwart her? What if she carried out her threat to harm Jane? How could he stop her? He’d tried to tell the Godmothering girl about the source of his aunt’s power, but even if she made it to Endscome, she’d be unable to find the source of the deathcaps’ power, hidden away behind enchanted gates. He did not even know what this power was. He only knew that it was some object that gave the right energy to the mushrooms his aunt had spent decades perfecting. He only knew she had made many agreements with darkness to gain the knowledge of her grisly gardening. There was some compost she used to grow the deathcaps in, and it was made of foul and murdered things.

He ran his hand through his thick waves of hair. It gave him a sickening feeling to think of what his aunt did in that secret hideaway of hers in the dark, wild woods. She would come back after a black moon looking aged by five years, with a fresh wart on her chin and a harder glint in her eye.

‘Will I ever be free?’ he groaned, rumpling his hair again, something he only did when he was at his wits’ end. He liked a well-groomed head in ordinary circumstances. He still felt ill from the ride back on Kroker, even the applebalm tea his faithful old elf-nurse brought him had not fully restored him, nor fully eased the rawness in his throat.

‘Little master,’ whispered a voice. Frank turned from the window, wondering why his nurse was whispering.

‘What is it, Nonny?’

‘There’s a scheme afoot. I wanted you to know.’

‘What kind of scheme?’

‘The gnomes have taken a mortal and two fairies to the Haunted Grove.’

‘A mortal and a pair of fairies. To the Grove. How unexpected. Who can they be, and how did they get in here without an alarm being raised? And why are you whispering, Nonny? There’s no one here but us.’

‘She has eyes everywhere, you know that. There’s a kilting in the air, do you feel it?’

Frank cast his eyes about as though looking for some sign of something out of the ordinary, but his head was still woozy and dull from his horrible journey home from Pucks Hill. ‘Can’t say that I do.’

‘Well, it’s there. We all feel it. ’Tis Midsummer Night tonight.’

‘I know. Auntie is always in a dreadful mood on Midsummer. I wish she still had her cottage to go to.’

His old nurse drew closer, her wizened nut-brown face lifted to him. When he had first arrived at Ease-Comely at the age of four, he had only reached his nurse’s waist. Now he towered over her, but she could still command him. By the age of seven he had renamed the house to End-Has-Come and put signs up at the minor gates to try to warn people away from the danger. It was his nurse who had taught him his letters.

‘Follow the mistress, my young master. She may need distracting away from the grove. Give the incomers time to do what they’ve come for.’

‘What have they come to do?’

‘I don’t know. But maybe they know it’s where the mistress’s power is kept.’

Frank’s brown eyes lit up. ‘I wonder if it’s the Godmother girl. Did she have black hair and the bluest eyes you ever did see?’

The nurse shrugged her thin shoulders. ‘Cannot tell ye what she looked like. There’s another two mortals in the garden. One’s a lady-knight and the other carries an enchanted sword.’

‘Another two! This is unheard of! Three mortals finding their way here without detection. But my aunt has gone out. She may have learnt of them and gone to deal with them.’

His nurse nodded. ‘Get out and follow her. Keep her from the grove. She’s weak today. Who knows if the kilting isn’t a foretelling of the queen’s

justice at long last?’ The nurse gave a sigh of longing, and her hand went to the thin cord about her neck.

‘Do you know what, Nonny?’

‘What, my little master?’

‘I should like nothing better than to see my aunt get her comeuppance. But, Nonny?’

‘What, little master?’

‘If I marry a beautiful maiden and have a family, will you be nurse to our babies?’

‘Any babe of yours would be as my own heart, little master.’

‘Then I’ll go. Wish me good fortune, Nonny, for my aunt is not best pleased with me today.’

‘I do more than wish you good fortune, I speak the Midsummer blessing over you.’

Frank’s eyes widened. Speaking the blessing was strictly forbidden at End-Has-Come. It was an offence punishable by long imprisonment in a deep, dark cellar until the offender retracted the blessing and cursed the queen, or died unrepentant.

*‘May the light of the longest day shine on you,
May the life of the greenest wood be in you.’*

She grabbed at the cup of applebalm tea close by and raised it up solemnly to say the words that sealed the blessing.

‘To brighter light and longer sight, to the goodness and glory of the queen.’ She took a sip and held the cup to him.

Frank hesitated, but only for a moment. He took the cup, his strong fingers touching the old fingers of his nurse. ‘To brighter light and longer sight, to the goodness and glory of the queen,’ he said, and took a sip.

There was a shuffling noise at the door of his chamber and they looked over in alarm. One of the hob footmen stood watching them. He stared at the cup as though it were the most magical fine wine in the Faerie Court. He came forward and held out his stubby hand. The cup was given to him. He looked into the amber-coloured tea and said slowly and reverently. ‘To brighter sight and longer sight, to the goodness and glory of the queen,’ and took a gulp.

‘Save some for me,’ said the elven housemaid, hurrying in and taking the cup.

‘And me,’ said the upper floor brownie, stretching out a hairy hand.

‘There’s no chance of it running out,’ said Frank cheerfully. ‘It’s my never-ending tea cup! Come in, come in.’ He beckoned to the servants, appearing with frightened but hopeful faces at the chamber door as the effects of the blessing caused drops of goodness to fall like soft rain, touching every person in the house. ‘Come in, come in, it’s Midsummer magic, and it’s long overdue!’



THE ENTRANCE to the hidden tunnel crouched behind the door of a shell grotto. A green pool gathered in the shade of the grotto, fed by the trickle of an underground stream, and it took all of Myrtle’s threats and cajoling to get the margool out of the water. They followed the gnome who hurried on, eager to be out of sight of the witch’s spies.

The tunnel was cold, and so black that Myrtle could see better with her eyes closed, sensing the curve of the walls either side of her, and the form of the fairies before her. She discovered that the margool had excellent night vision. His eyes glowed brighter than any fox or cat in the darkness.

‘I hope the badger won’t mind us using his tunnel,’ Myrtle said, as they began their descent. She was considering that it must be a very large fae badger to make a tunnel almost tall enough for a human to walk through.

The gnome did not answer, but only urged them to keep up, for the mistress kept griffin-rats as spies, and they sometimes prowled the tunnels. Myrtle chose not to ask what a griffin-rat was; it was probably best not to know.

It felt like miles, but likely it was only the darkness that made the time seem long. Finally, they emerged into a woody part of the grounds.

‘There it is,’ said the gnome, facing a little trail.

The trail ran into deepening woods.

‘Where is what?’ Myrtle asked.

‘Right before you,’ said the gnome. ‘Stop looking as a mortal would, or you’ll never see it.’

Myrtle looked again, focussing on sensing what was there and not on what appeared to be there. What appeared to be there was a sunny, dappled grove of trees with a path veering off into a woodland walk. When she applied her senses, she saw that the grove was more shadow than light. The

trees were so tall that they blocked out the sky. All was gloomy and whispery. A tall, metal gate blocked the way to the grove beyond.

‘The gates!’ Myrtle said, hurrying closer to see. The gates were of some black metal, and the margool’s head turned a corresponding shade of darkness.

‘Is it locked?’ said the mushroom fairy, reaching out to try the latch.

‘Wait!’ cried the gnome, catching hold of the fairy’s hand and tugging it back. ‘Once you open that gate, she’ll know it. All her power is bonded to what’s beyond, and she can tell if any steps foot inside.’

‘Is there any other way in?’ asked the fairy wife.

‘If there were, don’t you think I would have shown you?’ said the gnome. He looked about anxiously, his eyes darting from the tree tops to the thickets around them.

‘How long will it take her to get here once she knows?’ Myrtle asked.

The gnome shrugged, still casting fearful looks around. ‘Depends on whether she walks or flies. Not many minutes if she flies.’

‘And the source of the deathcaps’ power is within?’ asked Myrtle, assuming by the gnome’s anxious behaviour that he was not going to be leading them any further.

‘Somewhere within,’ he said. ‘We don’t go in there. No one does.’

‘We’re going to have to move fast then,’ said Myrtle. ‘And hope that Rue and Harriet can delay her long enough for us to find the power source.’

‘Let’s go,’ said the fairy bravely.

‘The luck of the gnomes be with you,’ said the gnome in parting, then he ran for the tunnel and leaped into it.

KNIGHT ERRANTRY

Emma reached the end of the enchanted road. The path disappeared as soon as she took the last step, leaving her standing on a broader pathway that looked as though horses and carriage wheels made some use of it.

She followed it to a pair of tall hornbeam gates, beautifully carved with an elven hand bearing the name *Ease-Comely* upon them. Through the palings either side of the gate she glimpsed a magnificent old manor set in beautiful grounds.

‘What a pleasing name for a house,’ Emma said to herself. ‘It has a familiar ring to it, but I cannot think where I’ve heard it.’

There was a sound of huffing, and from a thicket of nearby shrubs a great, black horse emerged, as though it had been grazing in the shade.

‘Why, you’re Frank Charmall’s horse,’ she exclaimed. ‘How came you to be here and alone?’ The last time she had seen Master Charmall’s horse it had been galloping away down Pucks Hill, with that strange Sister Myrtle as the invisible rider.

‘Sister Myrtle?’ Emma called, moving to the thicket to see if there were any sign of her. ‘Is anybody there?’

A crow cawed from the gatepost of the manor and Emma narrowed her eyes at it, for it was no ordinary crow; surely it was the very one that had turned into the great fae horse and carried Frank away. It lifted its wings and flapped away to the manor.

‘Ease-Comely,’ she said slowly, ‘is Endscome. That’s what Frank Charmall calls his aunt’s home.’ She shivered, though it was a hot afternoon. ‘So, this is the witch’s house.’

She stood in the pathway, clutching her father's Guardian Staff, and wondering what she should do next. The Green Man had put her on this path. It was no accident she was here. Was she here to rescue Frank from his aunt? But what enchantment would she be cast under if she fell into the path of the witch? She gripped the staff in determination. She could not walk through the front gate. She must find another entrance. There was always more than one entrance into an estate. She set off to find one, and to find it quickly before the crow alerted the witch to her presence.

There was a second gate, a smaller one, on the east side of the grounds. It had a childish notice on it warning: *Go Far Away or Never Return Home*, amongst other notices.

'I feel little inclined to enter that door,' said Emma, deciding to take the sign's advice. She walked on, following the palings and admiring the views of green lawns and gardens and fine trees.

'What a delightful estate. If only it did not have a vengeful witch as its mistress. I can see Jane Fairfayce strolling through those grounds very well.'

It was a considerable walk around the environs of the manor, and the sun was hot, and each time she heard a caw or a rustle or a twig snap, she was startled, half expecting the witch to step out of some unseen door to snatch her, just as she had snatched at her hair in the tower. She hated to walk alone; it was something she avoided as much as possible in Highbury.

On she trudged, without seeing anything but impenetrable palings stretching away. 'This is ridiculous,' she said, vexed at the time she was wasting. She stopped, struck her staff into the ground and called out, 'In the name of the Green Man, will someone please show me a safe way in!'

There was silence, save for the drone of bees and the calling of birds. A little movement caught her eye. It was a mole, three times the size of the moles in England. It sat wrinkling its nose at her, then ran on a few steps and stopped and twitched its nose again. Some instinct made Emma turn from her path towards the mole. It ran on, stopped, waited for her, and scurried forward. So she followed, thinking that while following a mole sounded ridiculous in Highbury, it somehow seemed quite unremarkable in Faerie.

She was not disappointed. She was led to a little door of weathered wood. She would never have found it alone, for it was hidden under ivy, and sat apart from the main grounds of the manor. The door was so old, the

bolt hinges had rusted away, and she could prise it open with her staff enough to squeeze through.

She was in a woodland. It was pleasant to be under the dappled shade of trees, and out of the eye of the Midsummer sun. But where was she in relation to the house? She was not well practised in finding her way, having never left Highbury until that morning's fateful trip to Pucks Hill. It was no small irony that on the very first day she had desired to explore beyond her village, she should find herself navigating a whole other kingdom, and quite alone.

'I turned east, then north, so I now need to turn westwards,' she thought aloud. 'Only... which way is west?' She looked about, as if for some clue. 'The shadows,' she said triumphantly. 'The afternoon shadow falls to the east. Or at least, it does in Highbury. I hope it's the same in Faerie. I will go this way.'

No sooner had she determined her direction, then a path obligingly opened to her. She wished Master Knightley could see her clever navigational skill. A pang struck her as she recalled that Master Knightley would soon cease to be concerned with very little of her interests anymore. When he married Harriet, all his attentions would be turned to his wife and her interests.

'How could he marry *her*? How could she marry *him*? How could *they* fall in love?'

The dart of pain was so strong that she had to pause a moment and press a hand to her heart. She took a deep breath. 'I am here to do the Green Man's will,' she reminded herself. 'That Papa may not suffer his wrath for failing his duty. I will do my father's duty. My disappointed heart has no place in this. It may be that I shall never see Master Knightley or Harriet ever again. Perhaps I shall be spared from having to smile at their wedding and hosting a dinner for the new couple.'

She groaned at this picture and pressed her heart again. 'My life is forfeit,' she said in anguish. 'I can never love another. When Frank is freed, he will marry Jane, just as he ought, and if I make it home to Papa, I shall resign myself to a quiet and useful life.'

With this resolve, and with a heart that felt as imprisoned as any enchanted tower could make it, she walked on. A deer came bounding out of the trees, startling her. She almost cried out, then chided herself for her nervousness. She must remember who she was. She bore the staff of the

Wild Man Guardian. But then she saw what had chased the deer into her path, and she did cry out in fear.

A creature the size of a great hound padded along on cat-like paws. Its body was that of a lion, but its tail was long and sinuous as a rat's, and its face was a fierce hawk.

It sniffed the ground, following the trail of the departed deer, but at the small cry she made, it looked up and locked yellow eyes with her own.

Emma felt everything else around her disappear. The only thing she was aware of in that moment was the proximity of the dreadful creature and how soon it would reach her if it sprang.

It took a step towards her, and she took a step back, lifting her staff with both hands.

'Get away from me, you foul fiend,' she warned. 'I was not sent here to make a dinner for the likes of you!'

The creature whipped its tail from side to side, and moved one slow step nearer, its shoulders hunched, its eyes fixed on her.

She took a step backward; the creature took a step forward – there was nowhere for her to flee to. Perhaps this was the end of her sorry tale.

She thought of poor Papa waiting for her at Hartfield, waiting in vain, and her second thought was that Master Knightley would never know what had happened to her, and would never know that she loved him. He would mourn for her as his friend, and his wife would comfort him. He and Harriet might now and then speak of her with fond regret. She hoped they would take good care of her father. She hoped they would be a friend to him.

The creature leaped. She made one valiant attempt to strike it with her staff. To her surprise, she felt the thud of her staff connecting hard with the creature. She heard it shriek – the sound like a cross between the cry of a hawk and a screech of a rat. It fell back a little way, but gathered itself up and made ready to spring again.

She stumbled backwards, felt a tree trunk at her back, and then felt the trunk give way, as though she were leaning against something that swung inwards.

The unexpected sensation of falling made her lose her balance. She stumbled to the ground, dropping her staff. She was a sitting prey now; she hoped it would not hurt too much. But there was a creak, as though a gate had swung closed, and though the creature leapt after her, it fell against some unseen solidity and screeched at being barred from going any further.

Emma scrambled to her feet, squinting to see what barrier was there, but she could see nothing, no gate, no fence. The creature paced up and down, screeching in anger. She snatched up her staff and ran.

THE TREES WERE VERY tall in this part of the wood. It certainly was an enchanted wood. Or cursed wood, Emma thought with a sinking sensation. She had been preserved from the beak and claws of one creature, but the wood of a sorceress might hold worse things yet.

She ran until the trees and undergrowth were too dense for running and she had to pick a path through briars and nettles and strange plants she had never seen in England.

There was something menacing about the way the trees towered over her, bending their branches to block out the light. She entered a grove of tall trees with light trunks the colour of peeled willow wands. The pale trees ought to have lessened the gloom of the grove, but they did not; they only added to the uncanny air by standing bowed and spectral, reaching out branches, twiggy and jointed like skeletal hands, to grab at her, though when she turned to bat away their grasp with her staff, she found nothing there.

‘This is a ghostly place, to be sure,’ she whispered, feeling all the dread of things unseen and unfriendly. Then came a sound that made her give a little gasp of relief – the sound of voices, and they sounded mortal. Oh, to be in the company of a fellow mortal at such a time! She had never cared to walk alone in Highbury, but the only threat to be found amongst its fields and woods was the occasional truculent bull or the leer of a gypsy passing through and demanding silver. But what were cows and gypsies to ghosts! She quickened her pace as best she could, desiring with all her heart to find them.



MASTER KNIGHTLEY STEPPED off the enchanted path and found himself nose to nose with a great, black horse.

‘Why, it’s Cobweb, is it not?’ he said, recognising Frank Charmall’s magnificent fae steed. ‘Such a foolish name for so princely a horse.’ He

rubbed its muscular neck, being as fond of horses as he was of dogs. ‘How came you to be standing here alone? Did that fearless Godmother girl ride you all this way?’ He glanced about him, seeing a pair of carved wooden gates with the name *Ease-Comely* upon them. ‘So, this is where I’ve been dispatched to. I’m to face the sorceress in her own demesne, am I? I hope that goes well for me.’ He did not feel much confidence. ‘How about you take me by way of the stables?’ he asked the horse. ‘I don’t care to go marching through the front gate, announcing myself to an inhospitable witch. I would sooner get the lie of the land from a distance.’

Cobweb gave a snort and snuffle that sounded amenable, so Master Knightley proceeded to mount him, letting him have his head that he might lead the way. The horse turned to the west of the gates and ambled along a bridle path, hidden from view by tall fronds of silvery ferns.

THE STABLES PROVED to be set back a good way from the manor house, and accessible by an unmanned and unlocked gateway, though Master Knightley felt the strong tingling sensation of passing through a protection spell on the gateposts. No doubt this would have drawn forth a guard or warden had he not been sat astride a horse that had a right to be passing through. He wondered what kind of guardian the witch employed. He hoped it was not something with fangs or large claws, and his hand drifted to his sword hilt.

He was met at the stable block by no more than a surprised hob, who bore no fangs or claws.

‘Who be you?’ the hob said. ‘And why be you riding the master’s horse?’

‘By way of a good deed,’ Master Knightley said. ‘I found it wandering and have brought it back.’

‘You can’t fool me with such a tale,’ said the hob, taking hold of the bridle. ‘Cobweb can find his way from anywhere in this kingdom and the next.’

‘My mistake,’ said Master Knightley. ‘And I thought I was doing a good turn on this auspicious day.’

‘Auspicious day?’ The hob looked more closely at him. ‘Be you a friend of *her*?’ he whispered, glancing about him.

‘Her?’

‘Her Majesty. Be you a friend?’

‘Certainly. And I come here on the business of the Green Man.’

The hob’s wary eyes widened. ‘Well. This be a day of surprises indeed. There’s something powerfully kilting and keen about this day.’

‘Has Master Charmall made it home?’ Master Knightley enquired. ‘He was borne away by some fiendish mount this morning.’

‘The master is at home,’ said the hob, still looking about him. ‘I ought to report your presence,’ he said nervously.

‘The mistress is at home then?’ The hob nodded. Master Knightly dismounted, his sword knocking against his leg.

The hob’s eyes brightened at the sight of the sword. ‘You’re a knightly guardian, come to fight her,’ he said, still whispering, still looking about him. He drew Cobweb into the stable, beckoning for Master Knightley to follow. ‘Is that so?’

‘Well... my name is Master Knightley, and I come at the injunction of the Green Man.’ He was about to say that he did not know exactly *what* he was supposed to do, now that he was here. His sword was enchanted, but it was no match for a sorceress who could likely turn him into a beetle if she chose, and render his sword useless. But the hob left him no time to say such things.

‘You must go through the front lawns, past the herbery, down to the maze. That’s where you’ll find her. Your companions be gone that way already.’

‘Companions?’

‘The lady-knights.’

Master Knightley stared, but there was no time to ask more questions, for there came the shriek of a bird in the air above the stable, and the hob fled from sight, saying as he went, ‘Watch out for Kroker. The luck of the hobs be with you.’

DOOMED TO BLINDNESS

The witch stood outside the maze, stroking her warty chin in perplexity. She wasn't going to waste any power on casting finding spells, or opening the hedges to see in. She was too weary for that. But she could not sense any human or fae creatures inside.

'Kroker,' she called. 'Get here, you feather-brain.'

Kroker swooped down, landing on the hedge wall. He kept his back to her, a sure sign he was irritated.

'You told me there were trespassers in my maze. Where are they?'

Kroker flew above the maze, circling the air above it again and again before returning to give the news that they were gone.

'No one can get out of my maze,' said the witch, her fingers crackling magic from the force of her irritation. Kroker hopped out of reach, his black eyes watching those dangerous fingers.

'Were there trespassers or have you turned lubber-pated?'

Kroker hopped farther away and assured his angry mistress that he would find them.

'You do that,' the witch growled, 'or I'll be giving you long ears as well as a bobtail. See how well you fly about making up tall tales then.'

Kroker set off, needing to appease the mistress he was bonded to. If there were any stupid two-legged creatures in the grounds, he would find them. He saw one of the griffin-rats prowling near the gate to the haunted grove. He alighted on a tree close enough to ask the griffin-rat what he was looking for, but not close enough for those claws and that beak to be in reach of him. They were senseless brutes and would pounce on anything that moved.

The griffin-rats had few words in their language, so Kroker could only ascertain that something had escaped the creature's grasp by passing through the ghostly gates. The enchantment would not let griffin-rats pass through; their boundaries were tightly set to keep them from eating gnomes and hobs and fairy servants.

Kroker flew over the Haunted Grove, looking for anything moving, but the trees were so dense, he could not see the dark ground below, and any movement might only be a ghost. He strained his ears to hear for voices, but he was too far up.

He flew back to give the news that at least one trespasser had been seen passing into the grove.



RUE AND HARRIET had done well to keep themselves out of sight of the big crow that skulked through the air, searching out the grounds. They huddled behind a border of tall, staked flowers with thick foliage. They kept the witch in view and watched her shuffle down to a tall evergreen hedge.

'What's she doin' just standin' there staring at leaves?' Rue wondered, when some time had passed.

'It looks as though she's talking to that crow.'

'But he's flown off now, and she's still stood there.'

'I suppose witches do all sorts of odd things,' said Harriet. A thought struck her. 'I hope she's not listening to us.'

'Not from this distance. Unless she's got bat hearing.'

It was Rue's turn to have a horrible thought strike her, for she thought of the bats' eyes she'd had to cook up for the witch's foul suppers. Did eating parts of bats give her the ability of bats? 'Perhaps we shouldn't talk,' she mouthed. Harriet nodded in reply.

Their hiding place was a good one, until a pair of crows settled on top of the support canes above Rue and Harriet's heads. The Sisters had their wits about them to keep very still while the crows chattered back and forth, as though discussing something.

If only a crow hadn't lifted its tail feathers and ejected a spray of droppings onto Rue; if only Rue had not flinched and turned her head in disgust at the streak upon her shoulder and hadn't knocked Harriet's arm in

the movement. If only Harriet, wound up as a coiled spring, hadn't jumped at this touch and made a metallic noise as her shield hit her armoured thigh, then the crows would not have looked down and seen the trespassers hiding in the flower bed, and Rue would not have had to swing her sword at them as they made to dive, with sharp beaks pointed at her face. A great squawking and shrieking ensued, and Rue's sharp sword cleanly cut off the heads of the tall plants that had concealed them, exposing them to the world.

The birds flapped and shrieked, the sword and shield swung, there was a squeal or two of terror from Harriet, and an '*Oomph, take that, you foul-feathered-fiend!*' from Rue, and the witch turned and narrowed her eyes to see the pair of hapless mortals standing in her bed of fae-foxgloves battling with a pair of her crow-guards.

The witch could still move swiftly when she exercised her power into doing so.

'What's this?' she said, her hand reaching for her jar of transformation spells. 'A lady-knight and a runaway servant of mine?'

Rue's heart sank as those familiar eyes fixed on her, and that familiar sneer was levelled at her.

'Look what has dropped into my garden. The clodhopper who burnt down my house. The one I was going to come after to rebuild it stone by stone for me. But she's saved me the trouble, or would that be the fun, of finding her.'

'Put your shield up, Harriet!' Rue cried as she saw the witch's hand raised. 'Deflect her magic with it!'

The witch crackled the magic between her fingers, shooting out little sparks and chuckling at Harriet, quaking and quivering as she batted them away with her shield. Rue deflected the sparks of magic with her sword, but she had no hope of landing any blows, not with a pair of crows circling round and diving at them.

Rue could see no way out of this impasse; she could tell what the old crone was up to, and the game she was playing. She thought of making a sudden lunge at the witch, to catch her off guard, but the pesky crows would keep diving at her, distracting her attention.

Harriet was gasping for breath, as the exertion of swinging her armoured arms and her shield around took its toll. The end was sure to come any minute; the witch was already looking a tad bored, and now she

was reaching for something in her pocket; something that writhed and wriggled in her hand, some dark magic spell, no doubt.

The witch muttered some words of incantation and rolled the squirming spell in her hand. Rue kept her eyes on it, watching for where it would be cast, or what it might become when it was thrown.

‘Have you had enough yet, you poxy little house burner?’ said the witch, rolling the black thing round and round.

Another crow joined in the assault, swooping down with a warlike croak. All three crows now descend upon Harriet, one was at her head, trying to peck through her visor, one was at her shield arm, rendering it useless as she tried to cast it off, and the third, the largest of the crows, the one which had carried Frank Charmall away that morning, flew at Harriet’s body, startling her with a blow to the back that sent her sprawling face down to the ground.

The witch cackled. ‘That’s it, my beasties, make sure she doesn’t get up again until I’ve got her where I want her. And now for you, my little mushroom burner.’

Rue’s desperation fuelled her for one last stand.

‘How those stinkin’ mushrooms did burn!’ she taunted.

Harriet had dropped her shield, and as Rue ducked to avoid a little bolt from the witch’s hand, she snatched up the shield and grinned. Now she could swing the sword round her head to keep the birds off, and use the shield to deflect the bolts. But she grinned too soon, for the witch cast a new bolt quicker than Rue expected, and it skimmed over her shield and struck her on the shoulder, throwing her down on her back, rendering her unable to move as pain seared through her shoulder.

At that moment it all seemed rather foolish and pointless, this sad warfare in which there was no hope of victory. She did not think the witch would kill her immediately, but she would exact her revenge in other ways that might be less preferable than an immediate death.

Rue opened her eyes to see the foul old face above her. From where she lay, she could see up the witch’s nostrils, and thought it was strange to be considering the length of the hag’s nose hairs in the face of certain and impending doom.

The witch raised her hand. The black thing squirmed. Rue braced herself for the strike, her eyes widening in surprise as another face appeared

beyond the crone's. The witch whirled round in time to deflect a blow from a bright, flashing sword behind her.

Rue could not get up, but turned her head to see a crow dispatched with a swift blow of the knight's blade – for a knightly man it was who had joined the fray.

'Master Knightley,' breathed Rue, watching as the two remaining crows and the witch fought back. She groaned as she exerted all her will to roll over and crawl along the ground She had to help. Her sword and shield were thrown out of reach. Harriet lifted her head, now that the assault on her had shifted to the newcomer. 'Master Knightley!' Harriet gasped. She too was struggling to get up, but her armour made it difficult.

The witch still held the black, wriggling spell in her hand. She drew back her arm. Rue couldn't let her throw it at Master Knightley – but all she could do was crawl faster and stretch out a hand to tug at the witch's gown, to pull her off balance.

'*Blind Mouse!*' called the witch and released the wriggling spell.

Master Knightley raised his blade – the black orb of magic left the witch's fingers, roiling through the air – but it had not been thrown true, for Rue's tug had been enough to shift the course of the spell.

The spell glanced off his blade, and split into two shards of magic – one shard struck a crow attacking his shoulder. The bird fell back with a cry that ended in a squeak, as it shrank down and down, shifting and morphing into a black mouse on the ground.

The second shard struck Master Knightley, and he too fell back, dropping his sword and staggering with his hands over his eyes, crying out, 'I can't see!'

The witch whirled round on Rue, lifting a second squirming orb and throwing it the short distance between them with a cry of – '*Blind Mouse!*'

Rue felt herself contracting as though her whole body were being compressed and diminished. The world grew larger, and the ground rushed to meet her, and then all went dark and she could see no more, nor feel her body as she knew it. She could hear, however, and she heard Harriet cry out as though her helmet had been wrenched off. The witch's word's of '*Blind Mouse!*' was shrieked a third time, and Harriet's voice tapered to a squeak.

'I'll deal with you later, Knight of the Well,' the witch's voice promised. 'I don't take kindly to folk who destroy my birds. Get out here, Kroker, if you want your wings back.'

There was a muttering of words and a crackle of magic followed by a crow's squawk. 'Call the others!' the witch ordered, and almost immediately there came a great cawing and flapping of wings. 'Fly on,' called the witch, and tell me if they leave my grove. Who led them there, I should like to know? I smell treachery in the air. Well. I'm coming for them all, and I am *not* in a good mood.'

TREACHERY

‘This is the foulest place I have ever stepped foot in,’ the fairy wife said. They were all inclined to talk in a low voice, for there was the prickling sensation of being watched and listened to. Tree sylphs draped themselves just out of vision, at least Myrtle assumed they were tree sylphs, if not then they were...

‘Ghosts,’ whispered the fairy husband. ‘Now I know where the ghosts of the poor souls in her compost heap have gone to. They’re kept bound to this place.’

‘Are we going in circles?’ Myrtle wondered. ‘Everywhere looks the same.’

‘No,’ the husband assured her. ‘I’m following my nose.’

‘We’re getting closer,’ the wife added.

The margool hopped and flapped along, skimming the undergrowth; clearly ghosts did not worry him. But he kept close to Myrtle.

‘What was that?’ Myrtle said, looking behind her. ‘I thought something tugged at my cloak.’

‘Ghosts,’ whispered the husband. ‘They’re gaining more substance the closer we get to the deathcaps.’

Myrtle pulled her cloak tighter about her, but something tugged at her hood and she whipped round to see. She gave a gasp as a wispy face was thrust into her own. She reached for her knife, which was a useless reaction, for what threat was a knife to a ghost? But when the moment of shock passed, and the eerie face drew back, Myrtle saw it was not a malevolent face, but a sad one. It looked like a small woodland elf, floating in a wreath of mist. Myrtle looked back and felt pity.

‘We will end the witch’s curse,’ Myrtle told the ghost. ‘And then you’ll be free.’

In reply, a cloud of ghosts surged round, enveloping her in a fog of sad and grieving faces. ‘We will end this curse,’ Myrtle promised again, and a tiny gleam of sunlight broke through the dense treetops, startling in its brightness. The old trees groaned and the ghosts sighed and rushed to the fragile little pool of light as though it were water and they were parched.

‘Well, well,’ said the mushroom fairy. ‘Would you look at that?’

‘Poor souls,’ said his wife. ‘How I should like to feed them soup and cheer them up.’

‘Will you show us the way?’ Myrtle asked the congregation of ghosts. ‘Show us where the deathcaps grow.’

The ghosts shrank back at the word deathcaps, and some slunk back into the shadows.

‘Show us where they are and we will destroy them,’ Myrtle said.

The first ghost, the woodland elf, separated from the shrinking crowd and tugged Myrtle’s hood as she passed her. She beckoned a faint hand, and they followed.



FRANK’S NURSE insisted on following him, as did the maids, the cook, the footmen, the scullion, the laundress, the butler and housekeeper. Frank could only walk slowly, still feeling unwell, but the effect of the blessing-cup, and the solidarity of the manor staff bolstered his courage. He was determined to do whatever he could to assist the brave Godmother who had come to destroy his aunt’s power.

The stable guardian joined the procession, accosting him before he had got past the garden gate to the grounds beyond. ‘Master,’ said the hob. He was a gruff creature with hair and beard that looked remarkably like a horse’s mane. But Frank had always liked him, for he was a kind guardian to his horse and had taught him to ride his first pony as a boy.

‘What is it?’

‘A mortal man with a dragon-slaying sword did ride Cobweb back to the stables.’

‘Cobweb is back? Excellent news! But who is this man?’

‘Calls himself Knightley. Says he’s come in the name of the Green Man.’ The hob’s dark eyes shone. A ripple of murmurs passed around the servants – a knight of the Green Man had come!

Frank realised he had never seen the guardian look like this before. He looked... hopeful.

‘This is an unexpected turn of events. Perhaps the blessing of Midsummer really is upon us. Where is he now?’

‘Followed after the mistress. She went down to the maze.’

Frank set off in that direction, frustrated by his slow pace, but buoyed up by his companions. Master Knightley here at End-Has-Come! Would his sword have any power over his aunt? He was sure it would take more than one sword to subdue her power. But the new gleam of hope that had arisen was tantalising and potent. Frank knew he had reached the end of his endurance to his aunt’s subjection. He would grasp at this tiny spark of hope with both hands, or he would die trying. Well, perhaps not *die*. There were still lots of things he wished to do in life. But he needed his freedom to gain them.

THERE WAS no sign of Master Knightley, but there was an odd sight to be found down by the cottage-flower borders. On the ground lay a discarded sword, shield, and suit of armour and a swathe of hacked down foxgloves. One of his aunt’s crow-guards lay nearby, looking as though it had been struck down by a blade. Black feathers littered the ground.

Frank picked up the sword and examined it. It looked very like the one Sister Harriet had been wearing that morning. There was something odd about the helmet. It had moved. He used the tip of the sword to lift the visor up and two white mice squeaked and huddled together.

Frank bent to look more closely at them, his nurse and the stable hob bending likewise to see. They were very large mice. Their eyes were tightly closed and one of them trembled like a plate of aspic jelly. He squinted, and sure enough, that telltale shimmer was around them.

‘Enchanted,’ said his nurse.

‘Blind mice,’ said the stable hob. ‘She usually casts that spell in threes.’

‘It must be the lady-knights,’ said the housekeeper, sounding disappointed. ‘They didn’t get far.’

‘They did well to take out one of Kroker’s birds,’ said the head footman.

‘Mistress will be furious,’ said a housemaid nervously.

‘Harriet,’ said Frank, addressing the quivering mouse, ‘is that you?’ The mouse squeaked in reply.

‘She said *yes*,’ said one of the maids, who was a woodland fairy, and could speak a little mouse. ‘The other one says *Rue. Help. Witch. Death. Caps*. Mice only speak one-word sentences,’ she explained.

‘Dear me,’ said Frank to the pair of mice. ‘This is rather a pickle. I don’t know any magic, so I can’t turn you back, but I’ll keep you safe until we can figure something out.’ Some impulse made him strap on the sword by its belt, just in case, and he took up the helmet, with the mice inside, and tucked it under his arm. There was no sign of Master Knightley. Perhaps he had been turned into the third mouse and had run off somewhere. ‘Keep your eyes out for another mouse,’ he instructed his band of followers.

Gnomes appeared. One by one they joined the procession, informing Frank that his aunt was now on her way to the Haunted Grove, following after the mortal and the fairies and the margool whom Cobb, the chief gnome, had led that way.

‘A margool,’ said Frank. ‘So, Sister Myrtle did come. What remarkable young ladies you Godmother girls are,’ he said to the mice.

Frank led the crowd through the rose arbours and into the fruit orchard where he called out to Cobb.

Cobb showed his face from behind a row of raspberry canes. ‘I s’pose you want to know where they went?’ Cobb whispered. His eyes widened at the sight of all the servants swarming in, filling up the paths around his fruit canes.

‘I know they went to the grove,’ said Frank. ‘Lead the way. You’re the only one who knows those tunnels. I must get there as quick as I can.’

Cobb hesitated. ‘One of the griffin-rats is abroad.’

Frank winced, and the crowd of servants murmured at this news. Frank had suffered a near miss with one of those vicious beasts when he was fourteen, and had a scar running down his leg to show for it. But this was not a day for drawing back. He put his hand on the sword hilt and said, ‘Lead on, Cobb. That Midsummer sun is high.’



JANE FAIRFAYCE STEPPED out of the black six-league path with the stone dragon before her, and a cauldron of bats in a cloud about her, each bat bearing a fairy or sprite.

‘So, this is where my Frank lives,’ said Jane, approaching the tall gates bearing the name *Ease-Comely*.

‘Not that way, maiden-in-love,’ cried the fairies. ‘There are many charms about that gate. They would hurt you as soon as you set foot there.’

‘Which way should I go?’ Jane asked.

‘We will find a way.’ Half of the fairies veered to the east side of the gates, the others to the west, flying low, to avoid any crows that might be about.

When they returned in a chatter of voices and a flapping of wings, they spoke of one small doorway, leading into woodlands. A door so old and forgotten, that its charms had not been renewed for years, and its bolt had quite rusted away.

‘Pray, lead the way!’ said Jane. Then she stopped, as a strange sound reached her ears. Something was coming through the trees, a whooshing, whistling, chattering confusion of noise. Flock after flock of birds came whistling and darting and soaring towards them.

‘*We are come! We are come!*’ cried the birds circling and flapping and chirping.

Jane stared in wonder at them, but she had not much time to stand amazed, for she was immediately startled afresh by the sound of heavy steps, thudding over the ground, breaking through branches; something very large and strong was coming through.

There was a great roar, and a smaller roar, and a smaller roar still, and a family of bears stood not far from Jane. She froze, wondering if she were about to be consumed, and so tragically close to where her lost love was bound.

‘I pray you, in the name of all that is good and lovely, do not eat me!’ she managed to cry out. ‘I am here on a quest for true love!’

‘*Just-ice*,’ replied the largest bear.

‘*Help-you*,’ said the smaller bear.

‘*Bad-witch*,’ said the smallest bear fiercely.

‘Then you are a friend?’ stammered Jane in relief. More rustling, more movement.

‘By the Lord of the Silver Wood’s request we are come,’ said a stag with magnificent antlers.

‘As are we,’ barked a skulk of foxes, their black noses twitching from the undergrowth.

‘As are we,’ squeaked a scurry of squirrels, arriving by way of the treetops.

‘As are we,’ snuffled a prickle of hedgehogs.

‘As are we,’ said a richness of pine martens, balancing on branches by their tails, and yawning, for they would usually be asleep at this hour.

More sylphs gusted round, joining the gathering. Lizards and dormice and tortoises rustled and shuffled and wriggled from their places.

‘Pray, lead the way,’ Jane called a second time, and the procession began.

THE ENTIRE EXTINCTION OF ALL HOPE

The ghosts would go no further than the great stones encircling the black bog. It oozed and burbled and was a living thing that smelled of death.

Myrtle wrapped her cloak about her mouth and nose to keep out the stench. Even the margool, impervious to magic, took one sniff at the edge of the bog and drew back, blowing red puffs in distaste.

Out of the bog rose small spears of black fungi, their stems thin and crooked, the caps pointed and jagged about the edges.

Myrtle eyed the deathcaps. 'So small,' she marvelled, her voice muffled behind her cloak. 'Yet so deadly.'

'There's a lot of them,' said the mushroom fairy, pulling out his bag of powdered mushrooms and peering into it.

'Do we have enough?' his wife asked, with a worried look at the stretch of bog.

'Hope is all we have,' he replied. 'I don't know how we will get our powder into the middle of the bog to rid the ones growing there.'

'Let's begin at the edges, just a flake of powder to each deathcap ought to do it,' his wife suggested.

Myrtle looked about for something that could be identified as the fount of power of this grisly bed of toadstools, but she could see nothing beyond the bog and the great stones around it.

'Where is the source?' she asked the ghost. The ghost pointed to the middle of the bog, and Myrtle's heart sank. How could they hope to find something in there?

The fairies worked carefully, moving around the burbling blackness, taking care not to touch the foul morass as they sprinkled a grain of their life-giving powder upon each deathcap within reach. There was some satisfaction in seeing each toadstool shrivel and hiss and sink down into the bog, leaving a small trail of black gas behind, like a candle snuffed out.

‘It’s working,’ Myrtle said eagerly. ‘Have you got enough?’

The fairies did not answer; they were concentrating hard on their delicate task. If they missed their target, a precious grain would be lost, and if they touched the bog with so much as one toe or finger, it would be poison to them.

‘Can I help?’ Myrtle asked, feeling useless.

‘Oh, you’ll be a great help, dearie,’ said a low voice from behind her. Myrtle whirled to see the witch standing with a face as dark as doom.

‘You’ll be a help as my bond slave. You can help me pick out which one of your little friends goes into my mulcher on the next black moon.’ She took a step closer, and Myrtle drew out her knife. The witch paid no regard to it.

‘Get the fairies!’ the witch called out, and there was a rush of wings and a volley of shrieks as nine crows flapped into the grove and dived toward the mushroom fairies. Myrtle shouted out a warning, but the fairies had seen what was coming, and disappeared from view, as they had done in the Silver Woods. Myrtle’s hammering heart was relieved to see them safely out of the reach of the birds circling around, looking in vain for them.

‘They won’t stay underground for long,’ said the witch. ‘Weak little woodland things can’t breathe in my soil and live.’

She looked at the smoking bog, where a swathe of deathcaps had shrivelled away. She snarled at the sight. ‘Destroy my work, the plaaguesores. Six years to harvest each precious one.’ Her face darkened. She rubbed her fingers together, and a crackle of magic sprang up. ‘I’ll be waiting for them when they come up gasping for air. Then I’ll deal with you, dearie, and your little margool.’

The folly and futility of this whole venture now settled upon Myrtle in a cloud of despair. What had they been thinking of? That they could sneak into the grounds of a powerful sorceress who had spent more than two centuries perfecting her arts, and just overthrow her with a sprinkling of mushroom powder? And what had happened to Harriet and Rue?

‘Your little friends won’t be coming for you,’ the witch said, taking her eyes from the place where she expected the fairies to reappear, to flash Myrtle a sneer.

‘What have you done?’ Myrtle asked gloomily.

The witch gave a hard cackle in reply, her eyes turning back to the ground where the fairies had sunk. ‘Here they come,’ she muttered.

Myrtle watched with mounting dread as the mulch earth rippled and made a little pop, and two fairy heads appeared, gasping for breath. The witch gathered her magic and took aim.

‘Duck down!’ Myrtle shouted.

Something struck the witch on the shoulder, and Myrtle watched in wonder as the bolt of magic went wide of the fairies’ head. It struck a rock to the right of them, splitting it down the middle with a crack, and throwing a crow who’d perched on top of it, into the bog with a screech. There was a dreadful sizzling sound as the bird sank quickly down and was gone.

A hurled stick had been the missile that had struck the witch, throwing her bolt off course. The margool could not resist a stick, even in the presence of sorcery and vicious crows, and he leapt on it with a squeal, shaking it vigorously in his jaws, and striking a diving crow off its course in the process.

‘Sorry, Auntie,’ said Frank Charmall. ‘But I think I’ve had enough of watching you bully everyone.’ He stood looking pale, but determined, with every fae servant of the estate behind him.

‘What’s this?’ said the witch slowly, looking round at the crowd pouring into the grove. ‘Some foolish treachery that will be avenged in full measure.’ Dark spots were spreading over her skin. Many of the servants shrank back at her glare, but some stood taller, returning her glare with one of their own.

The witch rubbed both hands together, her skin mottling as she used up the power within her, her eyes full of fury. Her crows perched on the stones around the bog, watching and waiting for the next order.

‘So, this is how it ends,’ said the witch, looking at Frank while she gathered more power into her hands. ‘I gave you everything a boy could want. Rich food, fine clothes, costly mount. And you repay me with treachery.’

‘You kept from me the most valuable thing of all, Auntie,’ said Frank wearily, as though he knew this was indeed the end.

‘What did I not give you the best of, you ingrate?’

‘You gave me no love. And you kept me from having it from anyone else.’

‘Love,’ spat the witch. ‘Love weakens you. Love gets in the way. Love makes a fool of you.’

‘Love is the only thing worth living for!’ cried a new voice defiantly.

‘Jane!’ cried Frank, spinning away from his aunt. He tried to move towards her, but there was a crowd of gnomes and elves in his path, and Jane was encircled by woodland creatures who surged into the grove with a cacophony of growls and roars and barks and squeals. The confusion was thick and furious as flocks of birds and bats wheeled round, attacking the eight remaining crows. Myrtle saw the mushroom fairies surrounded by fellow fairies who all took up a grain of powder and cast it on a deathcap. The sylphs and winged fairies flew across the face of the bog to reach the deathcaps in the heart of it.

In the next glance Myrtle saw the witch raise up her hands to cast her deadly bolts, but there was such a surge of creatures nipping at her heels, scurrying up the back of her gown, bats obscuring her vision, that she was kept distracted. Even the ghosts surged into the foray to tug at her sleeves and her hair, keeping her from directing her magic.

She raged, and she roared and she scattered the magic in her hands around her to free herself. It fell like little flames of black fire, and martens and bats and gnomes fell back, some lying as if dead, some writhing in pain.

The bog was so thick with the smoke of the withering deathcaps, that no bird or bat could fly above its poisonous cloud, but as the smoky cloud settled down, the bog receded, shrinking and contracting in a writhing motion until it was halved in breadth. A tip of a stone could be glimpsed in the heart of the bog, a stone unlike all the other great stones. Myrtle was sure that the power source was in or under that rock.

She wondered that the witch did not gather up more magic in her fists, but seemed deflated.

‘She’s out of magic,’ Frank cried with relief in his voice, touching the bond about his neck as though he could tell by the loss of pain that it was so. He now reached Jane through the throng, and they clung to one another. ‘And the deathcaps are gone!’

A great cheer went up, and the four remaining crows, who had not been wounded or poisoned or fallen into the bog, flapped away in defeat.

‘We must find the source of the power,’ Myrtle called. ‘It’s not over yet!’ But no one heard above the cheering. ‘We must find the source,’ Myrtle said to the mushroom fairies. ‘How shall we get across the bog to that stone in the middle?’

The witch was a sorry heap, crouching on the ground. ‘Frank,’ she said raspily, putting out a withered hand. ‘Don’t let it end like this. Come to me.’

Frank did not move. ‘I’m sorry, Auntie. I wish things could have been different. I wish you could have been as real family, and given up your dark schemes.’

‘Tell me it’s not too late,’ begged the witch. ‘I’ll give up the magic.’

‘You will?’

‘Don’t listen to her,’ Myrtle called. ‘She hasn’t got a grain of truth in her!’

Frank’s expression wavered between doubt and pity.

‘I am dying, Frank. I have no power left. Let the last word between us be a good one. Let me bless you and your true love.’

Frank still wavered.

‘Don’t listen to her!’ Myrtle warned again. ‘She is not capable of blessing – she’s consumed by curses!’

The witch made a great wracking sob of anguish. ‘I’m dying, I’m dying, and my boy – he hates me even unto death.’

Frank’s resolve broke. ‘I don’t hate you, Auntie,’ he said, moving forward. Jane clung to his arm, counselling him not to go near her. ‘I hate all your nasty works, and the enslavement and so forth.’

The witch wailed like a banshee, and all the fae and creatures and ghosts watched with uncertainty. She stretched out her hands again to say, ‘Let my dying breath be to bless you, my boy. Forgive me.’

Frank moved slowly towards her, with Jane still tugging on his arm, urging him to caution.

He squatted down to put a hand on his aunt’s shoulder. ‘I wish things could have been different,’ he said sadly.

‘So do I,’ she said in an equally sad voice. She reached up a quivering hand to touch his face. ‘So. Do. I.’ She growled, snatching her other hand from the pocket beneath her gown and casting a slithering black changeling spell into his startled face. ‘*You snake, you!*’ she hissed.

Frank had only time to gasp out to Jane, who flew to his side, ‘*Don’t... let...me...go...!*’

‘I won’t! I won’t! I won’t ever let you go again!’ Jane clung to him even as his body shrank and darkened and writhed until in her arms was a black snake as tall as Frank had been.

Jane gasped and shuddered, and thrust the snake with its flickering black tongue away from her face, but she did not let go. A bear came lumbering into the grove and made to swipe at the snake, but Myrtle cried out, ‘No! It’s Frank! Don’t harm him!’ and the bear drew back to join the appalled crowd.

The witch stamped her fists on the ground, shrieking, ‘Bite her, you good-for-nothing lubber-brain!’ The snake hissed and flicked its tongue and writhed. But as long as Jane called out, ‘Frank! It’s me! It’s Jane!’ the snake desisted from a fatal lunge.

The witch drew a second spell from her pocket and hurled it, roaring out, ‘*Lion!*’

The snake expanded and shifted and Jane struggled to keep hold of it as it morphed from a long, writhing creature into a broad, tawny-bodied shape with a mane of hair and great paws and the teeth of a mountain lion.

It roared and Jane fell with shock to the ground, but she did not let go of the lion’s mane, though she was white with terror. A second, larger bear came lumbering into the grove, roaring and lifting its paw ready to strike at the lion, but Myrtle ran between them crying, ‘No! It’s a man! Don’t strike!’

As long as Jane kept repeating over and over, ‘Frank, it’s me, it’s Jane,’ her voice hoarse but her grip unrelenting, the lion desisted from lunging at her with its jaws.

The witch snarled and ground her teeth and reached for the last of her spells and snarled out, ‘*Beast!*’

The exhausted Jane closed her eyes to shut out the hideous creature she now clung to by its scaly neck. Its body was wolf like, its tail was sharp-pointed, its head like no creature Myrtle had ever seen – bulbous-eyed, long-fanged, fins and scales and a great lolling, purple tongue casting foul-smelling spittle.

A third bear came bounding into the grove, roaring and charging at the foul beast, but the smaller bears blocked its way, saying, ‘*No – no – no!*’

All the birds and bats and sylphs and ghosts and winged fairies flew in clouds above the beast and his true love who would not let him go, and urged her to hold on, for the power of true love was stronger than death!

The witch howled with rage, and Jane, her strength fading whispered, 'Frank, it's me, it's Jane,' and as long as she held on, the beast desisted from lunging at her with its fangs and its purple, poisoned tongue.

This third beast was wilder than the lion and the snake, for the witch was muttering oaths and curses and adding them to the enchantment with all the darkness that was inherent within her, and as the beast writhed wilder at every curse, Jane's strength waned.

A new person came stumbling into the grove – a young woman, with a crown of heavy braids and a thick staff of ancient oak in her hand. She stood staring in horror at the scene before her. 'Jane!' the young woman called. She rushed at the beast. 'Help her! Why won't you help her! It's going to eat her!' She lifted up her staff, ready to strike it.

'It's Frank!' called back Myrtle, running to pull Mistress Woodhouse aside, that she might not dislodge Jane's grip. 'Don't strike – Jane must keep hold of him!'

'Frank?' Mistress Woodhouse's eyes widened. 'What can we do? This is dreadful!'

'Stop the witch from casting her curses,' said Myrtle. 'Your staff has power.'

'Gladly!' cried Mistress Woodhouse, rushing at the witch, raising her staff and demanding, 'Let him go! In the name of the Green Man, I demand you let him go!'

The witch snarled at her and flung a curse that caused Mistress Woodhouse to stumble back.

'Your paltry stick can't stop me!' hissed the witch.

'What can bind her?' Mistress Woodhouse cried, looking about her.

The bears rushed to bind the witch with their strength, but she flung curses at them to drive them back.

The bats flew at her, trying to distract her away from the beast and the maiden, but she flicked them to the ground with a word.

'Only something containing her own magic can bind her,' the mushroom fairy lamented.

'Her own magic?' repeated Emma, as though an idea had come to her. She spied the sword Frank had dropped and took it up.

‘Even a dragon-slaying sword won’t kill a sorceress,’ said the fairy.

But Mistress Woodhouse paid no heed. She dropped her staff, pulled a handful of pins from her hand so her coiled up braid tumbled down, skimming the ground in its length.

‘What are you—?’ began Myrtle, but in that moment, she understood what she was doing, and quickly said, ‘You’ll find this easier,’ and thrust out her own small knife with the elven blade.

Mistress Woodhouse dropped the sword, snatched the blade, made one swift stroke, and her braid fell to the ground. Seizing it, she marched to the witch and holding the braid, one end in each hand, threw it as rope about her and bound her arms fast to her side. ‘Be bound by your own magic!’ she cried.

The witch groaned and moaned as the binding held fast. The curses ceased – the power of love broke through the dark magic – and the mushroom fairies rushed to cast the last three grains of life-giving powder over the drooling, great beast. It began to shrink and contract, and slowly, slowly, where there had been matted, coarse hair there was human skin, where there had been bulbous, glaring eyes there were Frank’s brown eyes staring back at Jane in shock and wonder.

Jane, utterly exhausted, fell back to the ground, still holding fast to Frank’s neck, so that he also fell, lying across her.

‘You’re back,’ Jane said, with a sob in her voice. ‘Is that tail gone?’ She lifted her head to see and her white cheeks flushed as she spied his tail-less and bare behind.

‘Where are my clothes?’ Frank cried, catching sight of his own bare chest, and jumping into a modest crouch.

The fairies and creatures, who cared nothing for clothes, only cheered to see the spell broken and the witch lying defeated. But Myrtle rushed to gather up Frank’s scattered, torn clothes and tossed them at him, tugging off her own cloak to hold up as a curtain, that he might dress with all haste and modesty.

‘It’s not over yet!’ Myrtle called out. ‘We must take away the source, or she can begin all over again.’

‘The source, the source,’ was the cry that went round the fae and the creatures and the ghosts.

‘We must get to the middle,’ urged Myrtle.

The largest of the bears took up a great stone and hurled it into the receding bog where it landed with a dull thud. He picked up another and threw that, his fellow bears copying his action, casting stones into the bog until a path of stepping-stones was formed. The large bear crossed over the new-laid path to reach the black quartz-like stone in the centre. He lifted it, grunting and groaning with the effort, and hurled it out of the bog with a roar. It landed on a rock and split into halves. Inside there was nothing more than a small, round grey stone. Myrtle stared at it in disappointment. Surely this stone, no bigger than a songbird's egg, could not be a source of power strong enough to keep the deathcap bog alive?

A small dragon-like creature with a forked-tongue flicking out rushed to the stone and took hold of it.

‘What are you doing?’ Myrtle demanded.

‘It’s mine,’ hissed the little dragon, clutching it to itself. It had a pouch of grey, leathery skin on the underside of its belly, and it tucked the stone into it. ‘Now I can go home.’ It sighed.

‘I hope home is a long way away,’ said Myrtle. ‘If that little thing has been magicking this swamp, it must never be found again.’

‘It will return to the Valley of Ash, where it belongs,’ said the stone-dragon. ‘It shall be unbound from dark magic, and no one shall ever steal it away again.’

The bog drained away with a slurping, gurgling sound. The witch groaned and moaned, looking weaker with every passing moment. When the last bubble of bog subsided, leaving nothing but an empty crater in the grove, there came a shift in the air that rocked the ground beneath the feet of those standing.

The trees shook as though a great wind were gusting through their branches, and a shower of pine needles rained down with twigs and branches.

The margool leapt and dived and pounced as sticks fell, the fairies and birds dodged out of the way of the falling debris, ducking under rocks for shelter. When the great gusting and shaking ceased, the treetops had shrunk down, and instead of towering trees blocking out the sky, there came shafts of late afternoon sunlight lighting up the grove.

Cheers and shouts went up as long-hated bonds fell from necks, and the ghosts wreathing through the company faded with the sigh of a soft summer breeze, and melted into the motes of golden light.

Frank Charmall lifted his head from its resting place on Jane's shoulder and cried out, 'Cloaks! Quickly!'

He snatched up Myrtle's cloak, and tugged at Jane's urging her to unclasp it, then he rushed to the helmet he had placed carefully to one side and draped the cloaks over a pair of creatures that began to shift and expand and lose tails and blind eyes as they grew and reformed into mortal maidens.

More cheers, and more maidenly blushes were heard and seen as Harriet and Rue regained their bodies, but had to make do with cloaks about them, for their clothes had been left in a pile beneath a mound of hacked-down foxgloves. A pair of helpful hawks offered to fly away and recover the garments, and Harriet and Rue remained discreetly behind a tree while they waited, though Rue's whoops of joy were heard echoing through the glen.

'Where is Master Knightley?' Rue called out from behind the tree. She could not see him among the crowd.

Mistress Woodhouse caught the name and looked in surprise. 'Master Knightley? Is he in Faerie?'

'He saved our lives,' Rue called back.

Mistress Woodhouse paled. She turned to the witch. 'Where is Master Knightley?' The witch scowled and said with relish, 'Who can tell? Perhaps he's wandered into the path of a griffin-rat. Perhaps he's fallen into a well. Perhaps he's walked into my maze, never to find his way out.'

'Don't listen to her,' Myrtle said. 'We'll find him.'

The general joy and gaiety melded into urgent calls for everyone to make haste to Court, before the sun began to set.

'Wait!' Myrtle called out, clapping her hands to gain the attention of the crowd. 'There's a mortal man to find, and then we can be away to Court!'

A PROOF OF LOVE

Emma lifted her gown and ran. A white raven flew ahead of her. Being the bird of the woods best able to speak in the mortal tongue, he had agreed to find the missing mortal man. He would lead the mortal lady, whose enchanted hair bound the witch.

The witch was in the guard of the great bear, who held tight to her bond, ready to deliver her to the Court.

The white raven flew speedily over the trees of the Haunted Grove. The branches were opening wide, letting Midsummer light pour down in gold streams. The shadows were gone, the ghosts released, the gate to the grove was no more, the enchantment was ended.

Emma ran onwards, out of the grove, into the woodlands, where the ground broke forth into summer flowers – and came face to face with the griffin-rat.

She cried out, stumbling back, as she had done the first time, but the creature did not attack, instead, to her astonishment, it bent down on its forelegs and bowed to her.

Gone was its rat's tail and gone was its fierce snarl and bared teeth. Freed from its enslavement, it was still fearsome to behold, but it was restored to its right mind and its eagle's wings.

'Your pardon, my lady,' said the griffin in a deep vibrating voice. 'I was compelled to seek your harm, but now I am free to seek your good. What may I do to aid you?'

Emma still panted from her haste. She knew she could not run the whole of the estate, and she recognised the tone in the creature's voice: it was the tone of a gentleman.

‘I thank you for your offer of aid, sir. Can you carry me quickly in the direction the white raven shows?’

The griffin lay down. ‘Climb on my back, and I will bear you.’

Two more griffins took flight, and bats and birds and butterflies and winged-fairies and sylphs filled the air, but it was the white raven who whirled back to bring the news.

‘There is a mortal man wandering among the brambles in the Wilderness Walk.’

‘Lead us to the Wilderness Walk!’ cried Emma. ‘And make haste!’

THE WILDERNESS WAS LOSING its wildness, as the effects of the witch’s magic worked its way, foot by foot, through her demesne. The brambles slowly shrank down, their great thorns retracting like cat claws. On the ground, amidst a patch of brambles where he had wandered blindly, lay Master Knightley, bound by ropes of enchanted briers. Gradually, the enchantment broke, and bush by bush, bramble by bramble, was released from its spell.

‘Master Knightley!’ Emma flew to his side, not caring that thorns tore at her gown. She lifted his head and saw the milky whiteness of his blind eyes. ‘Are you hurt? What did she do to you?’ Emma wept and a tear from each of her eyes dropped down into each of Master Knightley’s blinded eyes. He blinked, and when his eyes opened again, they were brown, the colour of new-tilled fields.

‘Emma! I came to find you. But you have found me.’

Emma could only nod and blink back tears and refrain herself from kissing the man in her arms. Though the air of Faerie quelled enough of her inhibition to enable her to embrace the man she loved, she was restrained by the knowledge that his heart belonged to another.

The brambles retreated, and his legs were now released. She lifted his hand, seeing the dreadful scratches marked into his skin, and also refrained from kissing the wounds better as she felt the urge to do.

‘She is bound,’ Emma told him. ‘The witch is bound, and her magic is broken. The curse is undone.’

The brambles released his arms and chest as they shrank back and softened into bushes of dog roses. The fragrance was heady as pink and white roses sprang up around them.

Master Knightley sat up, rubbing his eyes. He looked at Emma more closely, so very close was his face to hers, that for one joyful moment she thought he was going to kiss her. His eyes lingered on her lips, and she longed to lean forwards to meet his own. He reached out a hand to her head, as though to bring her towards him, but his hand only lifted one short strand of hair. 'Emma, your hair. Did she do this to you?'

'No. I did it. To bind her.'

He looked confused, as though he could not understand why she would cut off her hair to bind the witch. She remained very still, still in expectation of him drawing her to him. Still longing to reach for him, but unsure, uncertain. If he loved another, it would be a presumption to do what she wished to do; it would result in embarrassment, rejection. But the soft look in his eye, the tender way he was touching her hair... could it be...?

'Where's Harriet?' he said, his expression snapping back to his usual briskness. 'And the Godmother girl? The last thing I recall is them lying under the attack of the witch. Tell me they still live!'

Emma nodded, unable to speak, her breath taken away by the pang she felt at his rush of concern for Harriet. It was Harriet who was his first thought.

'Thank the heavens,' said Master Knightley, jumping to his feet and putting out a hand to Emma, to raise her up. 'So many birds!' he exclaimed, looking up at the sky. 'And what is that?' He stepped back in alarm, putting Emma behind him as though to shield her.

'It's a griffin. It won't hurt us.'

The griffin made a polite bow of his head. 'We leave now,' he said. 'We go home.'

'I wish you good speed and the blessings of the day,' Emma replied. 'May you know brighter light and longer sight.'

The griffin bowed again, and he and his companions broke into a run, mounting up, their wings powerful and golden in the lowering sun.

'What a sight,' marvelled Master Knightley. He rubbed his eyes again. 'There's nothing like a spell of blindness to make you appreciate sight. Everything looks so much brighter.'

'That's because it is,' said Emma. 'The curse is lifting.'

'*Time to go, time to go!*' called the birds. '*Time to go,*' called the fairies and sylphs. '*Time to go,*' was the echo as every creature, mortal and fae gathered together, swarming through the gardens and out through the

opened gates of Ease-Comely. Frank Charmall and Jane Fairfayce walked arm in arm; Rue danced at the head of the procession; Myrtle kept up the rear, with the great fae bear keeping close hold of the prisoner.

Every creature hurried to the silver paths, eager to get to the Court before sunset, for one must never keep Her Majesty waiting. Every person, mortal or fair-folk, found within Faerie on Midsummer Day, must attend upon the queen.

THIS MEETING QUITE IN FAIRY LAND

The court of the Faerie queen was summer.

The first thing Myrtle noticed were the flowers: delphinium spires, feverfew bushes, airy larkspurs, fragrant lilies, love-in-a-mist, nodding poppies, clambering roses, sweet peas and sweet Williams, beaming sunflowers, bright zinnias, gentle freesias, and flowers never seen in England with names as fantastical as their colours and shapes.

The court of the Faerie queen was music.

The next thing Myrtle noticed was the sound of rhythmic drums, clear bells, soaring pipes, lilting harps, and resounding lutes, deep shawms and bright horns, and instruments never seen nor heard in England.

Everything danced at the court of the Faerie queen. The very air danced and spun and swelled with light and colour and fragrance and music. In the court of the queen there was no shadow – until the scrolls were unrolled, and the reckoning of the accounts began.

A HUSH FELL over the court; the hour had come. The music paused, the dancing ceased.

One by one the folk who had transgressed since the summer past came before the court, trembling and quivering and receiving pardon or punishment, according to the laws of Grace and Justice by which the Fair Kingdom stood.

The Proclaimer, a tall and fearsome looking elf, whose features seemed carved from marble, read out the charges. One by one the accused took their

place before the throne while their offence was declared.

There were a great deal of petty charges: the pilfering of a neighbour's loaf of bread from where it cooled upon a windowsill; the illicit milking of a neighbour's cow; disputes over the boundaries between fields, and accusations of one farmer moving the boundary marker of another. The charges were made, and by the light of Midsummer the accused could not deny any true offence, and were ordered to make recompense as was deemed fit by the queen.

Myrtle could sense that the worst of the punishment for most of the offenders was the shame they bore before their queen, more than the command to restore a new loaf of bread to the aggrieved neighbour every day for a month, or to work as a cow-herder for no charge to repay the value of the milk.

If these were the extent of the crimes committed by the fair folk amongst themselves, the court was a very tame affair, she thought.

But then came the crimes of those who had not done wrong, but failed to do good. Those who had not aided a traveller on their journey, nor assisted one in need within the lands of the queen. Their punishments were stronger, and many were taken away by guards.

'Now comes the judgment of the mortals found to offend against our queen and the laws of her fair land,' announced the marble-faced elf.

'The Court calls to the Place of the Accused the mortal maid of the name of Sister Rue of Highbury-over-the-Border.'

Rue was led forward to stand in the Place of the Accused.

'The charges against you are that of misusing royal magic.'

There was a collective gasp from the crowd at this charge.

'Your first offence is of misusing royal magic to turn a mortal into a donkey; your second offence is of misusing royal magic to turn a donkey into a mortal; your third offence is that of misusing royal magic to turn a mortal into a frog.'

'How do you plead?'

'I plead guilty as charged, and am as sorry for it as ever a mortal can be,' said Rue. 'I plead for mercy, for I see that I should never have misused royal magic, and all because I'd been careless over my mistress's wand. If I'd not been so distracted it would never have been stolen, and then everything wouldn't have gone all wrong, and I wanted to put it right, but I see now how you can never put nothing right by doing something else that

ain't right. And I'm right sorry for all the trouble I've caused, and I don't really deserve mercy, 'cause I've ruined Master Smith and Master Larkin's lives, and it weren't listed in my charges, but I did wrong in turning a chestnut sprite into a squirrel. Or half a squirrel. I'm right sorry for that too.'

There was a long silence as Rue's voice trailed away, and she hung her head.

'It is written in Royal Law that one who misuses royal magic shall not escape with their life,' declared the elf.

Myrtle's eyes blazed at this news, and Harriet, standing beside her, made a cry of '*Oh no!*', but Rue stood motionless before the queen.

'Will any speak in defence of the accused?'

'I will,' said a voice. And the Green Lady stepped forward, swirling green light about her and in her train. The crowd gave a sigh of admiration to see her.

'This maiden came before me, confessing her wrong. In place of the lives she had stolen away, I sent her to save the lives stolen from my land. By her own self-sacrifice, she accomplished this. I make a plea on her behalf that she has already given her own life in accordance with Your Majesty's law.'

'Where are the witnesses to the lives she has recovered?' demanded the officious elf.

An assortment of folk came trooping before the throne, bowing down to the queen: a brown bear with her cub, a mushroom fairy, and a woodland elf.

'Four lives saved for the lives blighted,' said the Green Lady. 'This mortal maid began the undoing of the sorceress that we have long endured as a blight upon our kingdom.'

There was a ripple of murmurs among the crowd, and Myrtle sensed a shift in the mood of the people. There was a new rise of admiration for Rue, who stood calmly before the queen, which was remarkable, for Rue was not naturally calm.

'You have made a good defence for the accused,' said the queen. 'Long have we waited for one to have courage to bring to an end the blight of the sorceress. The mortal maid has done a service which shall cancel out her transgression. Mercy is granted.'

A great cheer went up from the crowd and Rue bowed and stepped down from the place of the Accused and was dragged into a bear hug by the family of bears and cheered at by the mushroom fairies and the woodland elf.

The crowd was called to order and the elf Proclaimer declared: 'The second offence of a mortal against Her Majesty is to be judged. The Court calls to the Place of the Accused the mortal dame of the name of Henrietta Baytes of Highbury-over-the-Border.'

Myrtle and Harriet and Master Knightley were not surprised by this news, but Rue and Emma were very much surprised. Jane Fairfayce cried out as her grandmother was named, and Frank had to keep her back as she attempted to rush to her grandmother.

'Dame Baytes?' said Rue. 'Surely not!' Myrtle nodded.

Dame Baytes took her place before the throne. She was rather a sprightly Dame Baytes under the influence of Faerie, but she looked nervous as she took her place.

'The charge against you is that of theft. You stole a wand of magic, gifted out of Faerie, and only permissible for a Fairy Godmother to use. Furthermore, in its misuse, the darkling bridge was opened. How do you plead?'

'I can only plead for mercy,' said the quivering voice of Dame Baytes. 'I did wrong in taking matters into my own hands.'

'Will any speak in defence of the accused?'

'I will.'

Myrtle and Rue and Harriet stretched forward to see who the voice belonged to. Such a familiar voice.

'It's Mother Goodword!' Harriet exclaimed. 'She's back!' She gave a little jump of joy. 'I hope she won't be angry with us,' she said, her movement ceasing.

'What defence do you give for the accused?' asked the elf.

'I offer a witness of character to that of the accused. I have known her as a child and a student, as a mother and a grandmother, and can testify that this theft was out of character. It was driven by the desire to aid another.'

'The motive does not cancel out the crime,' stated the elf.

Rue and Myrtle and Harriet shared a look of alarm. This was very serious. Dame Baytes was but an old lady, and an impoverished one at that. What would happen to her?

‘The motive does not cancel out the crime,’ agreed Mother Goodword. ‘But it begs for clemency. The events set in motion by this wrong did, after much work and sacrifice, result in the sorceress’s power being defeated. The accused gave a full confession before she was brought before the court.’

There was a long silence before the queen gave her decree.

‘This is a crime deserving of punishment. But Sister Ivy, now Mother Goodword, holds a place of honour among my Court on account of her own grandmother, whose service to me I promised never to forget, nor to withhold favour from her descendants. Thus, I grant mercy, but if the mortal offends again, it shall not be passed over a second time.’

A cheer ran around the crowd, and the Highbury folk cheered the loudest.

‘If you please, Your Majesty,’ said a quavery voice. Dame Baytes had to repeat her words, for the noise of the crowd had not quite finished.

‘If you please, your Majesty, might I ask that your kind mercy be given to my granddaughter instead of to me. I will bear whatever punishment is meet, but my heart will break if my granddaughter is left to her fate.’

‘Grandmama!’ called out a voice.

‘Jane, is that you?’ Dame Baytes turned to peer into the crowd.

‘Yes, Grandmama!’ Jane pushed her way through to reach the front. ‘Frank is with me, and we are to be married!’

There was another round of cheers from the crowd, for everyone loved to hear of a marriage on Midsummer Night.

The cheering was quieted, Dame Baytes was released, and the elf read out the next charge.

‘The next offender against the kingdom is brought before Her Majesty. The Court calls to the Place of the Accused the mortal man of the name of Henry Woodhouse of Highbury-over-the-Border.’

But it was not Master Woodhouse who took the place of the Accused. It was Mistress Woodhouse who stepped into the place of judgement; her cropped head lifted bravely to meet the charges.

‘Who are you?’ the elf Proclaimer demanded. ‘You are not Henry Woodhouse of Highbury-over-the-Border.’

Mistress Woodhouse’s voice rang out clearly.

‘I am Maid Woodhouse of Hartfield, Lady Bountiful of Highbury, daughter of Master Henry Woodhouse, and I stand in the place of my

father.'

'Who grants you the right to stand in the place of another?'

'I do,' said a new voice that sent a ripple of awe through the crowd.

'Who's that?' Rue asked, gaping at the figure striding forwards, the crowd falling away into bows as he passed by.

'It's the Green Man,' said Myrtle, lowering her voice, for the crowd had quieted in reverence.

'He's right splendid,' Rue whispered back, gaping at the giant form of the Green Man, who seemed half ancient oak, half Faerie king.

'The charge of offence against Woodhouse of Hartfield is in my name,' declared the Green Man. 'I have accepted a substitute.'

'The Guardian of the Green Paths and the Forest of the East has the right to accept a substitute,' acceded the queen. 'He shall bring the charge. He shall administer the judgement.'

The Green Man's voice was as strong as thunder, as light as a flitting hart, as clear as an ancient spring. 'The charge brought against the mortal, Henry Woodhouse of Hartfield, descendent of the Wodes of Faerie, is that of failing to obey my summons as my servant. He failed to enter Faerie when called. He has breached his position. How do you plead?'

'I plead for mercy,' said Mistress Woodhouse.

'Will any speak in the defence of the accused?'

'I do,' said Mistress Woodhouse.

There were murmurs of surprise. This had never happened before.

'The accused cannot also offer a defence,' said the Proclaimer.

'As my father's substitute I stand as the accused, as Emma Woodhouse I stand as one who offers defence.'

There were now murmurs of approval. This kind of logic was delightful to the fae. It was like a riddle, and there was nothing they loved better than riddles.

'What is your defence?' asked the Proclaimer, when the queen had given her nod of assent.

'That Master Woodhouse has no longer the strength to carry out his duty as Guardian. His mortal frame cannot bear such responsibility now that he is in advanced years. I ask for mercy on the grounds of his mortal frailty.'

'It is frailty indeed to disobey,' said the queen. 'If the accused is not to carry out the duty and bear the honour of the position of Guardian of

Hartfield, then the accused must be removed and his son must ascend to the title.'

'Master Woodhouse has no son, Your Majesty,' said Mistress Woodhouse with a bow of respect.

'Guardian of the Green Paths and Forest of the East,' said the queen. 'This is your domain. What do you decree?'

'That the Guardian of Hartfield be removed from his position and leave Hartfield immediately.'

'And if he has no son, who shall you appoint as Guardian?' asked the queen.

'The one who will be as a son to him,' said the Green Man.

'I will,' said Mistress Woodhouse. 'May not a daughter be as good as son? Is not a queen as good as a king?'

The crowd liked this answer very much.

'I also wish to offer myself!' called another voice. Master Knightley approached the Place of the Accused.

This was interesting. A second offer of substitution. The crowd was enjoying this.

'I love Master Woodhouse as if he were my own father.'

Mistress Woodhouse looked as though she were blinking back tears.

'Mistress Woodhouse is excellent as Lady Bountiful. If she would permit me to bear the responsibility with her, I should wish to take the place of Guardian alongside her.'

'Alongside me?' said Mistress Woodhouse, still looking as though she were trying not to cry.

'Is this offer acceptable to you?' the queen asked the Green Man.

The crowd held their breath. Who would the Green Man choose?

'George Knightley of Highbury does not carry the line of the Wodes,' said the officiating elf. 'The position requires a fae bloodline.'

'But I do carry the line of Lady Breandern,' argued Master Knightley.

The Green Man gave consideration to this as the crowd murmured their pleasure at such a good answer. These mortals were delightfully entertaining. But the story of Lady Breandern was not a good one to bring before the queen; the lady had been one of her own Court, and she had forsaken it for a mortal man.

The Green Man looked to the queen, to see what her pleasure would be in this matter.

‘Let the Lady Bountiful decide,’ was the queen’s decree. ‘I will grant her heart’s wish. If she wishes to take the place of her father, she may do so. If she wishes to give the place to a man who would be a son to him, let him do so. But such a situation begs a question.’

The crowd waited eagerly. What was the question?

‘Would such a situation position them as brother and sister, or husband and wife?’

The Lady Bountiful turned first pale, then pink at this question. Master Knightley turned first pink and then pale and turned to the Lady Bountiful to see what she would say. She seemed unable or unwilling to meet his look.

Her voice was a little lower as she replied, ‘I should be glad to see Master Knightley as the Guardian of Hartfield. I know of no one else who would take up the position so well.’

The crowd was glad, but they were far more interested in the answer to the second question. The queen waited. The crowd waited. Master Knightley waited. The lady continued to look pale and flushed by turn.

‘Emma,’ said Master Knightley at last. ‘There is something I must tell you.’

The Lady Bountiful looked distressed.

‘I only fear that in asking it, things will never be the same again.’

‘Then do not speak!’ cried the Lady Bountiful.

The crowd gasped. Why did she not wish him to speak? What was it that he wished to say? He looked grieved. Displeased. He drew back.

‘I am sorry,’ cried the Lady Bountiful. ‘Tell me whatever you wish. As a friend you may tell me anything.’

‘As a friend! Emma, that I fear is a word—’

He broke off. The crowd leaned forward. What was he going to say? What was it he feared? How strong the scent of roses was! How delightful was the smell of True Love! All must come out on such a night.

‘Tell me, then, have I no chance of ever succeeding?’

He stopped and gazed down at her, and she looked back at him with surprised eyes.

‘My dearest Emma, for dearest you will always be, my dearest, most beloved Emma – tell me at once. Say “No,” if it is to be said.’

She only stared at him. Was she displeased? What would she say? Why did she not reply? Those of the crowd who had no wings, stood on tiptoes to

see.

‘You are silent,’ he cried, his voice full of feeling. ‘I cannot make speeches, Emma,’ he said at last. ‘If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. But you know what I am. You hear nothing but truth from me.’

The crowd gave a sigh of pleasure. He had said *the* word. He had told her he loved her! Some fairies began to dance already. But why did she not speak? Her face had altered. Surprise and confusion gave way to... joy.

She reached for his hand, saying, ‘When I found you in the briers, Master Knightley, I had the strangest sensation at our meeting. I had thought for one brief, happy moment that you were about to kiss me.’

He moved nearer to her, took hold of her other hand so they stood facing one another, very close, closer still.

‘Happy moment?’ he repeated.

The crowd could barely contain themselves.

Slowly, gently, determinedly, he bent down his head to kiss her in reply. The cheers broke out and the rose sprites flew round the lovers’ heads scattering petals down upon them.

‘YOUR MATCH HAS BEEN MADE, HARRIET!’ Rue said, shaking Harriet gleefully by the shoulders.

‘So it has,’ said Harriet, looking confused. ‘But I did think he loved... another. How very odd.’

The happy couple left the Place of the Accused. The cheering subsided. Now a long, low note of a horn sounded and the air of the Court grew very still.

The marble-faced elf bore a great scroll, so weighty that two attendants had to hold it one at each end. The scroll was unrolled, dropping to the floor in a great ream.

‘Eleven thousand, six hundred and sixty-two offences are brought before the Court against one personage of darkling power against Her Majesty and her kingdom.’

‘Eleven thousand!’ gasped Harriet.

‘I know who this is,’ said Rue.

‘The Court calls to the Place of the Accused the darkling personage known as Lady Charmall, Dame Deathcap, Sorceress of the West, Witch of

the Wild Woods.'

The crowd gasped and murmured and whispered, and a shadow entered the Court with a foul smell. Those standing closest to the Place of the Accused shrank back as the sorceress was brought to stand before the queen.

She stood bound with a rope of braided hair, baring her teeth like a cornered animal at those who hissed at the sight of her.

'The charges against you are too many to name. They are summed up in one: that of rebellion against the light. Every working of darkness is accounted to you. In murders, in kidnappings, in enslavements, in all cursings and workings of darkness. How do you plead?'

'How do I plead, dearie?' The witch's voice was full of malice, but it was weakened. 'I plead for you all *to rot into mulch and manure!*'

'Will any speak in the defence of the accused?' called the Proclaimer.

There was absolute silence.

The queen spoke at last. 'The sorceress seeks no mercy, and no one offers a word in her defence.' Another long, grave moment of silence fell. It was a dreadful thing to have no one to speak in your defence. It had not happened in two hundred years.

'The Court decrees you must be bound long enough for your power to leave you. Perhaps then you will seek for mercy.'

'I don't want your mercy!' spat the witch. 'I don't want your poison! Your light and music and talking, it hurts my eyes and gives me the headache! You're all a rabble of wallydraigle, snollygoster scobberlotcher buffleheaded *plaguesores!*' Her voice rose to a shriek.

'Silence!' ordered the queen, and the witch was rendered mute.

'Guardian of the Green Paths and Forest, it was among your demesne that this creature took up her abode. What shall be her sentence?'

'She shall be bound for a century in a place where she can do no harm,' said the Green Man. 'I bind her in a tower of my own enchanting. I will place it in the heart of the Black Forest until her time is completed.'

'So be it,' said the queen.

The crowd watched as a great stone tower rose into the air above the Court and the witch rose likewise, as a ragged crow, to be thrust through the window, and the window sealed with bars. The tower flew away, far from Court, far from sight, and the foul words the witch had spoken into the air

were cleansed away by elves bearing branches of green birch and fragrant herbs.

‘The accounts have all been reckoned,’ announced the elf. ‘Her Majesty’s Court is closed. Now begin the festivities.’

Cheers and shouts and songs erupted and the music struck up and the crowd dispersed to dance and feast and celebrate.

Rue laughed with relief and danced on the spot. ‘She’s gone! Hurray Hurrah!’

‘Let’s find Mother Goodword,’ Harriet urged, looking among the crowd for her.

Mother Goodword’s silvery hair was glimpsed beyond a fountain of lilies, standing with Dame Baytes and Frank and Jane.

There were so many questions, but nothing to wonder at, for in Faerie on Midsummer Night nothing was very surprising.

‘The work is not complete,’ Mother Goodword told them. ‘That which pertains to Faerie has been judged, but there is still much to resolve in Highbury.’

‘Master Smith and Ben,’ said Rue.

‘Let us return home and put things aright,’ said Mother Goodword.

‘Not even a dance?’ said Rue, looking about at the rings of dancers. ‘Not even a taste?’ She looked longingly at the mounds of faerie fruit and the fountains of wine.’

‘Would you stay?’ Mother Goodword asked.

Rue looked around again and then looked at her friends. ‘No,’ she said decidedly. ‘You are right, as always, Mother Goodword. There is much to resolve.’

‘How shall we get home?’ Myrtle wondered. ‘The bridge is gone.’

‘There is always a doorway between here and there on Midsummer Night,’ said Mother Goodword. ‘Tonight we may return home on the same day we left. Master Knightley, Wild Man of the Woods, would you lead the way?’

Master Knightley looked startled to hear himself thus addressed, but he bowed in reply and turned to lead the way to the door he had come into Faerie by.

A MATTER OF JUSTICE

Elizabeth Martin sat on a saddle stone listening to the sound of the meadow sprites singing, catching a few minutes to herself before she went in to supper. Wood smoke gave the evening air a tang. She liked the smell, and she liked the music and singing and the way it melded with the hooting of the owls and the twinkling of the stars. She kept the little basket beside her, as she had done for months past. It was a dreadful bind having to carry it everywhere, but she had promised never to let it out of her sight. But how much longer would it be? What if Rue never came back? Some people never did come back from Faerie, or came back long years later.

The most magical hour of Midsummer Night was about to come; the hour when it was said that the Faerie queen herself rose from her court and joined the dancing. That was the pinnacle of summer, when the Faerie year renewed. She watched the sky carefully, waiting for the evening star to glow bright and blue – the sign that the queen had joined the dance.

The singing gathered pace; a scent like lilies filled the air, the evening star began to glow, brighter and brighter. ‘Oh, my!’ sighed Elizabeth, ‘I’ve never seen it so bright before.’ Then came a dazzling flash, as though the evening star had exploded, or her lantern had been thrust into her face. She cried out in surprise, throwing up her hands to shield her eyes from the unbearable glare.

‘What happened?’ asked a voice.

‘What indeed!’ replied Elizabeth. ‘What was that great light?’ She opened her eyes, and then jumped up from the stone with a cry of alarm, not knowing whose voice she had heard. The basket beside her was knocked over – and where was the frog?

‘Oh no! Come back! Where are you, frog?’

‘I am here,’ said the voice.

‘Who is there!’ cried Elizabeth, whirling round to see the form of a man. He was crouching down, and he moved behind the saddle stone as though to hide. She reached for her lantern, swinging it wildly in her fear.

‘It’s John Smith, and I beg you would put down that lantern!’

‘John Smith! Can it be?’ And she thrust the light towards him and saw his face, and his shoulders and arms and his bare torso... ‘You’re naked!’

‘I am. Pray, put the lantern down.’

‘Oh! Indeed!’ She swung round to put her back to him, glad that it was dark and there was none to see the scarlet blush that raced over her cheeks.

‘What happened?’ she called over her shoulder.

‘There was a blinding light,’ called back Master Smith, ‘and I felt every mote of my being shift and stretch and reshape and suddenly I was myself again—and, oh! How glad I am to be myself again!’

‘As am I!’ Elizabeth spun round as she spoke, then caught sight of his skin glowing in the starlight and whirled away again.

‘Maiden, would you do one last kindness to me?’

‘What is that?’

‘Fetch me some clothes.’



BENJAMIN LARKINS DREAMED he was a donkey, and a beautiful Faerie queen bent over him and dropped a kiss upon his hairy head and bid him rise a man. He rolled over, feeling the scratchy hay beneath him where he lay in the empty barn, and yawned, forgetting that his yawn would come out as a strangled bray, but wait! It sounded as a yawn! An actual *human* yawn! He opened his eyes and his heart began racing as he saw a human arm flung before him. He wriggled his fingers – *his* fingers! *Human* fingers!

‘Hooraaah!’ he yelled, leaping to his feet and dancing up on them – *two human* feet! Not four hooves! He touched his head – human curls! So soft after the rough coat of a donkey! And no fleas! ‘Hoo-Raah!’

‘Hee-Haww!’ came a response, and Jack the donkey was Jack the donkey once more. There he stood in his own hairy, flea-ridden, hoof-footed body!

‘Hoo-Raah! HOO-RAAH!’

‘Hee-Haww! HEE-HAWW!’

Ben pulled the barn door open and ran out feeling June sunshine touch his skin – his human skin!

A shrieking noise caused him to stop his madcap dancing. A pair of young ladies stood a little way off clutching one another in alarm.

He glanced down, realised he was naked, and rushed back into the barn, slamming the door.



IT WAS a welcome pleasure for the three Sisters to awaken in their beds at the school, with Mother Goodword home. She had spoken firmly to Cloe-Claws regarding the harmlessness of the margool, and on provision of Myrtle promising to keep the margool out of Cloe-Claws’ way, he was permitted to enter the school, and she regained her bed at last. There was a minor spat in the pantry between cat and margool over a plate of sardines, which the margool had helped himself to for a midnight snack. Myrtle had to appease the affronted cat with a promise to rush to the fishmonger first thing to replace them.

There were questions about Master Smith and Ben Larkins, but a great and overwhelming exhaustion had settled on them all when they reached home, as the drama of the day’s events caught up with them. Mother Goodword ushered them off to bed, saying that daylight would right all things.

The Sisters were at an early breakfast when two of the pupils came into the school, come to see if it were true that Mother Goodword had returned; they rushed into the hall shrieking that there was a man in the grounds, who appeared out of nowhere, and disappeared into nowhere, and he was *naked*. Mother Goodword’s quick thinking guessed who it was at the same time Rue did. Snatching up the nearest sizeable covering to hand, which happened to be an embroidered tablecloth, Mother Goodword led the way to the invisible old stone barn.

‘I should have thought to check the barn last night,’ Mother Goodword said, as she and Rue hurried along. ‘The old hiding spells upon it would

have kept them well hidden from mortal eyes. Cloe-Claws told me she had found travellers in need of shelter and had led them to the barn.'

Rue skipped ahead, eager to see if it really was Ben Larkins. She reached the barn first and banged on the door.

'Go away!' yelled a voice that Rue recognised as Ben's. 'I'm not decent!'

'Here,' shouted back Rue, 'take this to cover up with.'

The door cracked open and a young man's hand groped through it and took hold of the cloth and pulled it inside, shutting the door again.

'I'm right glad to see you back in your own body!' Rue cried, beaming at Mother Goodword. Rue had been so used to living with Ben-who-was-really-Jack that she had not been sure whose hand it was which had appeared. But Ben-who-was-really-Jack had not had the dexterity to take hold of the cloth as Ben-who-was-really-Ben had just done.

'No thanks to you, I'm sure,' was the muffled reply from behind the door.

'What am I to do with a tablecloth?' Ben cracked the door again to call out. 'Set the hay bale for dinner?'

'I know you're angry with me, Ben Larkins,' said Rue, 'and I don't blame you one little bit – is Jack with you?'

There came a bray from within the barn. Rue grinned, turning to Mother Goodword again. 'Jack's back to normal too!' She was so pleased she hopped from one foot to the other in what Myrtle would have called her clod-hopper dance.

The door was yanked wide and Ben stood covered from his armpits to his knees in embroidered violets.

'Couldn't you have brought some actual clothes?'

'We was in a hurry, and besides, we don't have no men's clothes at the school. I'll run and get you some from your house – your family will be right pleased! Wait!' she added, 'Promise something first.'

'Promise what? I hardly think I owe *you* anything! I should say it's you who owe me!'

'Don't get teasy,' said Rue, 'this is *right* important, Ben – I want you to promise you'll go straight to Hannah Hazeldene and propose marriage.'

'I don't need to promise you to do that,' said Ben. 'I did so before you turned me into a donkey.'

'You did? You never said!'

‘You never asked! And it was a secret, for my mother would not be best pleased.’

‘Oh, your mother won’t care about who you marry now, she’ll be that glad to have you back you could marry old Dame Baytes and she’d be happy!’

‘Sister Rue,’ protested Mother Goodword. ‘Your humour is a little off.’

‘Have I permission to tell your mother you’re alive an’ well and are going to wed Hannah the minute you get back?’ urged Rue. ‘Say yes and I’ll be gone!’

‘Yes, and yes, and get gone!’ said Ben.

Rue whooped with delight – ‘Myrtle’s match is made!’

‘Be as quick as you can, Sister Rue,’ Mother Goodword advised. ‘Come to the school to wash and eat,’ she said to Ben. Her nose wrinkled, as did Rue’s, as Ben took a step nearer.

‘Pooh!’ said Rue.

‘You’d stink if you spent however long it’s been living as a donkey,’ grumbled Ben. ‘How long has it been?’

Mother Goodword led him away, answering his questions.

An impulse seized Rue – she would ride Jack over to the Larkins’ house. ‘Come out of there, Jack! Good to see you back to your old self. We’ll have to find your master – oh!’ A thought struck her – ‘Master Smith! If you and Ben are turned back, I must see if he’s turned back too.’ And she sprang onto Jack, who was a little taken aback by the sudden movement. He brayed and gave his rear legs a little kick and shot down the path with Rue jogging along on his back, crying out to slow down.

The garden sprites all laughed to see her go by, and flew round her, thinking it a good game to tease her while she could not swat them away, for she was too busy clinging tight to Jack’s mane.



ELIZABETH MARTIN EXPECTED Rue to show her face that day, presuming that Rue would have some connection to the undoing of the bad spell she had cast.

However, she did not expect Rue’s appearance to be quite as dramatic as it was, for Rue came charging through the courtyard of the farmhouse,

clinging to the back of a half-crazed donkey, with the cockerel running after her.

‘Call the bird off!’ Rue shouted, catching sight of Elizabeth, ‘Before I fall off! — *Oof! Ouch!*’

Rue landed in a heap of petticoats on top of Mistress Martin’s rose bush.

‘Sister Rue – can you never stay out of trouble!’ Elizabeth scolded, as she pulled Rue to her feet. ‘Mama will be furious to see her roses crushed.’

‘Well don’t you mind me!’ said Rue. ‘Your wretched cockerel chased the donkey halfway down the lane, pecking at his legs and driving him wild – and I get thrown into a thorn bush!’

‘Pull your petticoats down, you’re a disgrace!’ And then Elizabeth burst out laughing. ‘Oh Rue! I am glad to see you back. Come and see Master Smith.’

‘He’s alive then,’ Rue said, feeling that she deserved more sympathy and thanks than she had gotten so far. ‘I rode here quick as I could to see if he were all right. Ben Larkins is back.’

‘Glad to hear it. I guessed as much when I saw you coming on that donkey.’ And Elizabeth laughed even harder. ‘Oh, Rue, you did look a sight!’

Rue scowled and tramped ahead to the farmhouse door. ‘I hope no one else saw me,’ she muttered. But when she gained the hall, there came the sound of laughter from the front parlour and she entered to find May and Master Smith holding their sides and laughing uproariously.

‘Oh, Sister Rue!’ gasped May. ‘You did look funny!’

‘Like... a... sack of tatties!’ said Master Smith, between gales of laughter.

‘Then – plop! Into the rose bed!’ cried May. ‘With your petticoats over your head.’

‘Well, you’ll be glad to hear I’ve not broken nothing!’ said Rue indignantly. ‘Thanks very much for your concern.’

‘I apologise,’ said Master Smith, exerting great effort to stifle his mirth. ‘It was not gentlemanly of me to laugh so.’

‘No, it weren’t.’

‘But it’s been a long, long while since I’ve been able to laugh, Maid Rue.’

‘Sister Rue, if you please.’

‘What’s all the noise?’ said Mistress Martin, coming in with floury hands. ‘Oh, it’s you, Sister Rue. I thought you might show your face today. You’ve met our visitor here, Master Smith. I hear you know all about Master Smith.’ Her tone was a tad acerbic. ‘Glad to see you’re back safe and sound also,’ she added in a kinder tone. ‘But why have you got a spray of crushed rose buds sticking out of your hair? I hope they’re not from my beds?’

A second person came down the hall into the parlour. ‘There’s a stray donkey running amok among the chickens,’ said Robert Martin. ‘Anyone know what tomfool let him loose? Oh, it’s you, Sister Rue. I thought I saw someone charging past the meadow gate on a wild donkey. It is a donkey, isn’t it? You haven’t been turning any more poor souls into beasts and frogs, have you?’

There was much joking at Rue’s expense all this while, and she said crossly to Elizabeth, ‘I thought it was all to be kept secret?’

‘You can’t keep a secret in Highbury, Rue,’ said Elizabeth laughingly. ‘Come on, let’s look at that nasty scratch on your hand, there. Those rose thorns are fierce, good thing you didn’t land face first. Goodness, Rue! You’ve only been back two minutes and already you’re causing a riot!’

THE NECESSITY OF A LITTLE CONSOLATION

Harriet was a little perplexed and rather grieved. She had received a note from Mistress Woodhouse; it was a very kindly worded note, but Mistress Woodhouse had written that it would be best if they did not see each other for a while. The note did not say so, but Harriet was sure it was to do with Master Knightley and all the confusion over who he did or didn't love, and who Harriet did or didn't love. Harriet sighed as she re-read the note. Mistress Woodhouse suggested that Harriet might like to visit her sister in London. Her sister would be pleased to have Harriet's help with her children. Harriet mused that if she were going to fail as a Godmother, then perhaps she ought to get used to helping with other people's children; working as a governess would be ten thousand million times better than being an eel-catcher.

By luncheon hour she could keep her pent-up feelings in no longer, and she sought out Mother Goodword.

'Come in, Harriet,' said Mother Goodword, not even looking up from her desk to see who it was. The desk was piled high with papers and books, as though Mother Goodword were undertaking some in-depth study or accounting task.

Harriet shut the door behind her, and slumped onto the squishy, comfortable cushions of Mother Goodword's chair.

'Now,' Mother Goodword said, putting her quill down and moving from her desk to her cabinet where she kept her jars of tea. 'Sweetbriar and lavender. That is what is needed for wonderful times like these.' The kettle began to sing, and the cups were already laid out. Mother Goodword really had been expecting her.

‘Why do you say wonderful times, Mother Goodword?’ Harriet asked. ‘I don’t feel wonderful. I ought to. Everyone is home. Everyone is safe. I ought to be happy. But I feel all jumbled up, like a... tangle of yarn.’

‘Which is why you need tea. These are wonderful times, for they are times of change.’

‘But some of the changes are not wonderful, Mother Goodword. Yesterday morning I was quite sure that Mistress Woodhouse was the best and dearest friend I had in the whole world, and today she writes to say we ought not to see one another and wants me to go to London, which is as far away from her as I can imagine being, not that I wouldn’t like to go to London, I have always longed to see London. And yesterday I thought that a certain *someone* cared for me, and today I do not know if it is true or if it was real or right or anything.’

‘Stir a spoon of honey in, dear. Now tell me all about it.’

The whole sorry tale came out. Mother Goodword listened patiently, making nods of encouragement when Harriet faltered in places.

The tale of Harriet’s admiration for Master Elftyn came first, and her foolishness in replacing him as her ward, and trying to match him with Mistress Woodhouse, while Mistress Woodhouse had tried to match him with herself. Harriet had been quite sure she had made the perfect match.

‘And he did ask Mistress Woodhouse to marry him, but by then we had realised that he was the wand thief, or one of them, and he was trying to charm Mistress Woodhouse into marrying him, even though she did not really love him, but thankfully his plans failed, and Mistress Woodhouse refused him, and he went away and came back with the new Mistress Elftyn, and then, oh, dear, I think I had better not name any names, Mother Goodword, but then there was another man, a very great gentleman, who was very kind to me, and began to show me attention and even brought me flowers on my birthday – a rare orchid called *Love’s Wish* – if that were not proof of love, and I was not sure that I actually *loved* him, it was just so nice to think someone so good liked me, especially when I had been feeling so very lonely.

‘And Mistress Woodhouse asked if I thought the gentleman showed any proof of his affection, and I said that I thought he did, and she went quite pale, and very quiet and she was not herself, and I could see that it was very disagreeable to her, and now she has made her match with this gentleman, and now I have had this letter from her saying that we ought not to meet,

and I must go to London, and now I don't know what I am to do, or how I can put things right between us. But I did not love him. I only liked the thought of his perhaps loving me. And I am truly glad that he is so well matched. I only wonder that I never thought of Mistress Woodhouse as his match before! I have been a miserable matchmaker, Mother Goodword.'

And thus Harriet's sorry tangle was unravelled, and Mother Goodword poured her another cup of tea.

'But are you quite sure about the orchid, Harriet?' she said. 'That is the only part I do not understand. Are you quite sure the orchid on your birthday was from Master Knightley? Did he actually say that it was from him?'

'To be sure, he did. I remember it all very well. He said, "I have something for you, I will leave it here on the step," and then he wished me greetings of the day and he was gone. And I hurried down and there were the flowers on the step, roses and meadow blossom and anemones, and the beautiful orchid. So, you see, they must have been from him, or he would have said so, would he not?'

'Hmm,' mused Mother Goodword. 'Harriet, dear, do not trouble your heart on this matter until things become clearer. That would be my counsel. Do you feel better after your tea?'

'Oh, yes. Your tea always makes me feel better. Thank you. And I will do as you say. I will not think about all of this. I will wait and see if things come clearer.'

'Very good, dear.'

'Did you ever see a *Love's Wish* orchid? It is very romantic to give such a flower to a lady on her birthday, do you not think?'

'Whoever gave you the orchid has a very romantic sensibility. But try not to think of it.'

'Indeed. I will not think of it. Such a pretty colour. Such pretty markings. Like little pink love hearts.'

'Very pretty.'

'And very rare. He must have searched and searched all over to find it. So very kind. So thoughtful. But I will not think of it.'

'Finish up your last bit of tea.'

'I do think that a man who would search for a flower so rare and with such a romantic name to give to a person on their birthday when no one else

had remembered it was their birthday, I do think that such a man must be the kindest and best of all men in all the world.'

'I do not disagree, Harriet. But try—'

'I will not think of it.'

MOTHER GOODWORD WATCHED Harriet leave her parlour, looking a little lighter in spirits, but still rather tangled in thoughts.

'She talked a good deal of matches and proposals,' Mother Goodword noted to Cloe-Claws, who had resumed her usual position on the windowsill. 'But the proposal that really mattered, she said not a word of.'

Cloe-Claws yawned and stretched herself.

'I know. She will awaken soon enough. What a jumble these matters of the heart can be.'



SINCE THE RETURN TO SCHOOL, Mother Goodword had grown very particular with Harriet about the chores Harriet was to do, and never had Harriet been given so many.

It was not like Mother Goodword to be unfair, but Harriet felt that things had been rather unfair of late, and she could wish that her visit to London had been arranged immediately, instead of being deferred until the end of term, after the North Wind had made her visit.

She had been made to go through all the account books, checking them thoroughly. She had spent several afternoons shut away in the storerooms making inventories of everything. She had been asked to write down all the particulars of Mother Goodword's school duties, taking long hours of dictation from her. She had been ordered to read all the handbooks on the rules and regulations of the Godmother Council and write a tedious summary of it all. Many a time she had wanted to ask Mother Goodword why all this unnecessary study was being put upon her, and not on Myrtle or Rue, but every time she had been about to say something, Cloe-Claws, would give a little growl, as though she knew Harriet's thoughts.

Right at that moment, Harriet knew that Rue had gone out to have a nice long gossip with Elizabeth Martin, saying that she would make the most of

the pleasant afternoon, and Myrtle had said that she would walk with Rue as far as Donwell Meadows, for Master Knightley had told her she might borrow some books from his library.

Harriet felt a surge of resentment as she thought about the pleasant afternoons her friends were enjoying, while she was shut up indoors cataloguing herbs and roots and learning how to correctly spell lots of new words.

‘I know I haven’t finished,’ she told Cloe-Claws who sat with her tail curled around her paws, watching her at work. ‘But I don’t see why I shouldn’t have a walk now that the sun is out. Why should I be the only one doing all the work?’ She pulled the ties of her apron loose and threw it down.

‘Is that you, Sister Harriet?’ called Mother Goodword, from the parlour door as Harriet passed it by; Harriet considered pretending she had not heard and walking on, but Cloe-Claws came padding beside her and her tender conscience smote her.

‘It is,’ she said, feeling petulant. ‘I just want a breath of fresh air.’

‘Would you step inside for a minute,’ Mother Goodword called, ‘I have something to—’

Harriet did not wait to hear what it was that Mother Goodword had for her to do next. She was thoroughly fed up with the endless chores. She was going out for a walk, and not even Cloe-Claws was going to stop her!

Yee-oww-ll

Cloe-Claws *was* going to stop her. The silver tabby sat in the doorway, blocking Harriet’s way, fluffing out her fur and tail in displeasure.

‘Oh, all right!’ Harriet snapped. ‘I wish you’d stop following me around everywhere! Why don’t you follow Rue around? She needs watching out for more than me.’

Harriet stomped back down the hall to the parlour, though her slight figure and small feet did not stomp with much effect.

‘Come in,’ Mother Goodword called, her voice sounding muffled, coming from inside the large wooden chest she was bent over. She stood up, bearing an armful of rolled-up parchments. Harriet eyed them warily, hoping it wasn’t more old handbooks or accounts or ledgers or instruction manuals to read, copy or file away.

‘I thought now would be a good time to get all the paperwork in order,’ Mother Goodword said from over the top of her scrolls. ‘Take these from

me, dear, and put them on the desk.'

Harriet did as she was bid, and Mother Goodword bent over the chest to gather up more.

'Why is it a good time now?' Harriet asked, a little sullenly.

'The North Wind is very particular. Best not to give her any cause for complaint when she comes. The students will be back on Monday for the rest of the summer term, so we'll make good use of these few days.'

Harriet felt a sinking feeling at the mention of the North Wind. 'I suppose there's no chance of graduating,' she said. 'I suppose I'll be sent away when she comes.'

'You made your match, dear.'

'I can't take any credit for it. And I made such a blunder over Master Elftyn.'

'Well, we'll see what Grand Godmother North has to say. Put these on the desk.'

'Was there anything else, Mother Goodword?' Harriet asked, when the chest was empty. She felt very flat.

'When you have finished in the apothecary room, come and read through these scrolls. I have some more somewhere. I'll hunt them out. It's a pity Busie can't organise my papers as well as she organises the house. But brownies don't read, of course.'



RUE FOUND Elizabeth Martin in an unusually low mood.

'She's missing Master Smith,' May whispered, nudging Rue's arm as Elizabeth poured her pail of milk into the churn.

'I can hear you, May,' said Elizabeth. 'And I can assure you I am not missing the responsibility of watching over a frog night and day, feeding it, keeping it from drying out, talking to it.'

'Didn't say you were missing the frog,' said May. 'I said you were missing Master Smith. They talked all night, the night he turned back into a man,' she whispered to Rue. '*On their own.*'

'He's gone home, has he?' Rue said, thinking that it was too good to be true, Elizabeth Martin falling in love with someone at long last.

‘Said he had to go straight home and let his Pa know he was alive,’ said May. ‘His folks likely thought something dreadful had happened to him.’

‘Something dreadful did happen to him,’ said Elizabeth dryly. She put the pail down with a clatter. ‘He got turned into a frog for half a year.’

‘All’s well that ends well,’ said Rue, trying to inject some cheer. ‘I suppose that’s the last we’ll see of him.’ Her own cheer faded. It was too bad he was gone. That was her last hope cut down as soon as it had risen.

‘I hope I never like anyone in a romantic way,’ whispered May. ‘Seems like everyone always end up miserable when they like someone. First Robert, now Eliza.’

Rue could not argue with such an observation, and if Elizabeth overheard, she only said, ‘Make yourself useful, Rue, put those arms of yours to work and churn some butter.’



THE LAST DAY of the summer term arrived. The younger students had all left. Of the older students, three would return next term to begin their Godmothering training.

‘Lizzie Coster as a Godmother,’ said Rue. ‘Hard to imagine.’

‘Mary-Jane Milliner will need to forget fashion and concentrate on her studies more,’ said Myrtle. ‘Lucy will do well, I think. Better than we did. Though it’s not difficult to do better than we did,’ she added. ‘Seeing as we failed.’

‘We don’t know that,’ said Rue, but with little hope.

‘We soon will,’ said Myrtle. ‘Look at that sky.’

‘I hope Harriet don’t get caught up in it.’ Rue ran outside, then ran back in. ‘The fox is pointing to the north,’ she said, giving a little shiver. ‘She’s on her way.’

‘I hope Harriet doesn’t keep the North Wind waiting,’ said Myrtle, trying to stop the margool from running out of the door. ‘If you go getting soaked, you won’t be allowed back in till you’ve dried off,’ she reminded him. ‘Busie gets cross if you leave wet prints everywhere.’

They peered out of the door, watching as the sky darkened, and the clouds swirled ominously.

‘Here she comes,’ said Rue as a great clap of thunder resounded, sending all the sprites into hiding.

But it was not Grand Godmother North who was the first to arrive. Instead of the expected sound of chariot wheels whirling through the air, there came the sound of hooves clip clopping over the courtyard.

‘Who is that?’ Myrtle wondered, as the rain clouds burst and the approaching mount and rider quickened their pace.

‘I’d know that donkey anywhere,’ said Rue. ‘It’s Jack! Hoy, there Master Smith – get in out of the rain! What brings you here?’

Master Smith leapt from his donkey and tugged him into the shelter of the porch.

‘I’ve come to speak with someone of the name of Harriet Smith,’ he said, pushing back his hood and brushing raindrops from his face. ‘Is she here?’

‘Harriet?’ said Myrtle.

‘What do you want with Harriet?’ Rue asked. ‘She’s running errands. I daresay she’ll be along soon enough. Do you want to come in and wait?’

‘No, I had sooner go on to my next destination,’ said Master Smith. ‘My nerves won’t let me linger. I’ll come back directly.’

‘Nerves?’ said Rue. ‘Why would you be nervous of Harriet?’

‘Not of Maid Smith, but of the young lady I’m going to.’ He turned his donkey around.

‘But you can’t leave without telling us what you want with Harriet,’ said Myrtle. ‘Or we’ll be wondering over it all the rest of the day.’

‘And you can’t ride out in this,’ added Rue. ‘Have some tea.’

‘No, indeed. I am anxious to be on my way. But I’ll be back within the hour. I’ve waited seven months to meet Maid Smith, another hour will not signify much.’

‘Master Smith, you’re leaving us in a right state of mystery,’ Rue complained.

‘It’s no great secret,’ said Master Smith, ‘or rather, it is, but it’s time for the secrecy to be undone.’

The rain was lashing down and bouncing upwards on the courtyard cobbles. Master Smith and Jack drew closer to the doorway, under the shelter of the wide porch.

‘I came to Highbury last year to find Maid Smith. I did not know of her whereabouts until then. The death of my mother had lately occurred and

following it my father owned a family secret to me – that of an unknown child he had fathered by another woman.’ He looked apologetically at the Sisters, as though he was sorry to tell them a sad tale. ‘I learned that the child was sent away, first to a foster home, but it turned out that she was not being cared for as she ought to be. Her Godmother intervened on her behalf and she was sent to a boarding school to be educated, and all was done under a cloak of secrecy.’

‘Blundering Bearcubs, you’re Harriet’s brother!’ Rue cried.

‘I am. And I wish to meet her and be reconciled. I came last winter, but was most unfortunately delayed,’

Rue gave a groan of shame.

‘When I was righted again, I hurried home the next morning, knowing my father would be desperate for news of me. But now, as you see, I make my quest a second time.’

‘I would not have you delayed any further, Master Smith,’ said Mother Goodword’s voice, as she joined the Sisters at the porch. ‘Here, a gift,’ and she waved her wand to make a dry-spell over him. ‘Be on your way, you will arrive warm and dry.’

Rue stared at Mother Goodword, amazed that she should use magic for such an unnecessary thing. ‘He could have waited till the rain stopped!’ she said, surprised at such a use of magic.

‘His journey is of the utmost importance,’ Mother Goodword said. ‘Well deserving of Godmother magic.’

‘Shall I have success?’ Master Smith asked anxiously as he mounted Jack. ‘Could you give me a charm to aid me? I get rather tongue-tied when I’m nervous.’

‘Aid you for what?’ Rue asked.

‘You have all that you need,’ Mother Goodword promised him.

‘Where are you going?’ Rue called out, but he was riding away, waving goodbye. ‘Where’s he going?’ she asked Mother Goodword.

‘Why, to propose marriage,’ said Mother Goodword, as though she were surprised that Rue did not discern this for herself. ‘Could you not smell it? See it? Hear it in his voice? Sister Rue, what have you been doing these past years, you seem to have lost all your senses!’

Rue’s face lit up. ‘He’s going to propose to Lizzie, ain’t he?’

‘Is not he?’ Mother Goodword corrected. ‘Oh, here she comes!’ And all looked up to see the whirlwind as Grand Godmother North descended upon

the courtyard. The sound of the kitchen door banged, alerting them to the return of Harriet by the back door.

EVERYBODY'S DESTINY

Busie brought the tea things in, and hot tea was needed when one was in the presence of the North Wind. Only the margool sat without shivering in the largest of the classrooms, where the fireplace had been made ready.

‘This will be a short visit,’ said Grand Godmother North, ‘I dislike visits in summer. Are they all here?’ She scanned the three young faces before her, the Sisters huddled together to keep warm.

‘Never in all my long centuries have I read and heard such strange accounts as those of this years’ students,’ the North Wind declared.

‘They have been remarkable students,’ Mother Goodword said.

‘Theft,’ said the North Wind, glaring at Rue. ‘Corruption.’ She stared at Myrtle. ‘Folly of every kind.’ She turned her icy gaze to Harriet.

‘Mistakes made,’ said Mother Goodword, ‘and learnt from. Reparation sought, at great personal sacrifice. Humility, self-knowledge, courage.’ Mother Goodword looked at her three students as a mother over her children. ‘I am proud of them.’

Harriet would have shed tears at such warm words, but it was too cold for crying, so she sniffed instead. Rue stood in the middle of the three, linking her arms through those of her companions, and they stood in solidarity before the fierce North Wind.

‘Have they completed their assignments?’ was the dreaded question.

There was a pause, before Mother Goodword said, ‘Almost.’

‘Almost does not qualify,’ said the North Wind. ‘Almost is not a pass.’

‘If we could just wait a minute,’ Mother Goodword said. ‘I sense it coming very near.’

‘I have no time to spare,’ said the North Wind. ‘Yours is not the only establishment awaiting my visit.’

‘There!’ said Mother Goodword. ‘Did you sense it, Sister Rue?’

Rue wrinkled her nose, sniffing the air.

‘I smell it,’ said Harriet excitedly.

‘Roses!’ said Myrtle.

A gentle breeze ruffled Rue’s hair and she beamed round. ‘He’s asked her,’ she said. ‘And she’s said yes!’

There was a pause, as the Sisters waited for Grand Godmother North’s pronouncement. It felt like an age before she spoke.

‘So be it,’ said the North Wind in words like soft snow.

There was a flash as the North Wind lifted her hand, and the Sisters closed their eyes against the light. When they opened them, Rue was dressed in forest green.

‘Godmother Rue,’ said the sharp voice of the North Wind, ‘your next assignment is to train under Godmother Willow, the Wisewoman of the North.’

Rue looked down at the wand in her hand. ‘I’m a Godmother? I’m to train as a Wisewoman?’

Myrtle stood in dark blue.

‘Godmother Myrtle. Your assignment is to the southwest, where you will study under Godmother Columbine, the Record Keeper and Chronicler of the Great Library.’

‘Library?’ Myrtle’s eyes gleamed, and she looked at the wand in her hand.

Harriet looked down at herself. Her gown had not changed, and she bore no wand. ‘I’ve failed,’ she said faintly.

‘Surely not!’ protested Rue, but was silenced by an icy glare.

‘The Council credits Godmother Rue with weakening the power of the sorceress of the west. It required so significant an achievement to cancel out three counts of unlawful transmogrification, and the weakness of her matchmaking assignment.’

Rue could not deny these observations.

‘Godmother Myrtle has been credited with leading the final overthrow of the sorceress. Her matchmaking assignment was also weak and requires further training.’

Poor Harriet looked ready to slump under the weight of her disappointment.

‘Harriet Smith had the weakest score in matchmaking, having overthrown her appointed match altogether and attempted to replace him with another.’

Harriet hung her head.

‘She has gained credit in displaying courage in accompanying her fellow Sisters into Faerie.’

‘There you go,’ whispered Rue, squeezing her arm.

‘And she has gained further credit in her faithfulness in maintaining the school in her mistress’s absence.’

‘And she did it all on her own,’ Rue couldn’t help adding. ‘Which was hard as can be for her. She even looked after my bees, and she were afraid of them before.’

Another frosty look silenced her.

‘Master Martin helped with the wood and the shutters,’ Harriet said in a small voice.

‘The Council is making changes to the structure of this school,’ the North Wind continued. ‘There will be a division between the Godmothering school and the younger students. A new position has opened. A mistress is required to act as Mother and Headmistress to the younger children.’

‘When will I have to leave?’ Harriet whispered.

‘That depends on whether you wish to accept the position.’

‘Position?’ Harriet blinked. ‘Accept?’ She looked questioningly at Mother Goodword.

‘Grand Godmother North is offering you a position, dear,’ said Mother Goodword. ‘As Mother and Headmistress of the younger children. It will not require magic or matchmaking.’

Rue squeezed Harriet’s arm again, but managed to restrain herself from a burst of congratulations.

Harriet blinked slowly again. ‘You mean... I can stay here? I can look after the children?’ A smile crept over Harriet’s face. ‘I can stay with you forever?’ she said to Mother Goodword. Her smile dimmed as she saw Mother Goodword’s look. ‘But where are you going?’ Harriet asked, her voice as pitiful as a lost child’s.

Mother Goodword gave a significant nod to the North Wind.

In reply, the North Wind touched Mother Goodword's head with what looked like a long, swirling icicle.

'Grand Godmother Goodword, your next assignment awaits you in the south, as previously discussed with the Council.'

Grand Godmother Goodword bowed, her new gown of gold gleamed as sunrise. She held no wand. She had no need of one now. Her students stared at her in amazement, for all her grandmotherly wrinkles had quite smoothed away, and a new power radiated from her.

'Might I have a simpler name to be known by? Grand Godmother Goodword is quite a tongue-twister?' She laughed, and rays of light flashed out like sunbeams from beneath a cloud.

'Lady Gold,' suggested Rue in an awed voice.

'The Sunrise Fairy,' offered Harriet.

'Very romantic names.' Grand Godmother Goodword laughed.

'Very foolish names,' said the North Wind. 'You will take the name of your predecessor, Lady Aurora, as Grand Godmother Dawn.'

'Thank you,' said Mother Goodword, who was now Grand Godmother Dawn. She cast a warm ray over her students. 'Call upon me when you need me at the hour of sunrise. I shall never fail to aid you. But I have a request, Grand Godmother North. I have one matter to attend to before I leave.' She passed her glowing hands over herself and was once again in her familiar form, though there was a new gleam of light surrounding her.

'I require a little longer to prepare Mother Stoutheart for her new duties, and I have a match to complete with my own ward before I leave.'

'Who's Mother Stoutheart?' Harriet whispered to Rue.

'That's you,' Rue whispered back.

'Me? Mother Stoutheart?'

'Mother Stoutheart,' said the North Wind, 'your assignment is to train up young ladies in the ways of Verity and Virtue and discern if they are fit to go on to Godmother elementary training. Do you accept it?'

Harriet could only gape.

'Say yes,' Myrtle and Rue hissed.

'Y-yes.'

'Your new assignments begin at the fall of the First Apple,' granted the North Wind.



MASTER KNIGHTLEY PUT on his coat, for the early morning was cool enough for it; the wind was coming from the north despite it being late summer. He set off across the meadows, tramping along the dewy ground, his eye measuring the length of the grass; one more week and it would be ready for another scythe. His steward met him, and they walked along a little way together. It was good to see William Larkins returned to his old self, now his son was home.

‘So, Larkins,’ he said, ‘when’s the wedding?’

‘Sir?’

‘Young Ben and James’s daughter. I’m not mistaken, am I? I heard they were to be married.’

‘So they are, but we were keeping it quiet. Who told you, sir?’

Master Knightley thought it might not be in the young lady’s interests for him to admit to their wandering about Highbury after dark, so he only said, ‘Oh, some little sprite or sparrow. She’s well thought of by all. I’m sure she and Ben will do very well.’

‘The missus isn’t best pleased,’ said Larkins. ‘Though she’s coming round slowly. But when a Godmother comes bursting into your house promising the return of your youngest son on the grounds that he must marry a certain young lady, well, what can a mother do but agree?’

‘By the by,’ said Master Knightley, as the Donwell orchards came into view. ‘I never did ask you who got the Last Apple in last year’s harvest? Did you give it to Ben?’

‘No. I dared not interfere in dishing out enchanted apples. The apple was yours to give, sir, and I only did as you bid me to.’

‘And what was that?’

‘You bid me give the rest of the apples to the Baytes ladies.’

‘I see. Well, none of those ladies can have eaten it. Not if the apple was mine, for I certainly am not going to be married to any of that household.’

‘I should hope not, sir. There was some talk of you and the pretty granddaughter, if you don’t mind me repeating it, but then she turned out to be engaged to Master Weston’s boy, so that put paid to that. Then there was talk of the Weston boy marrying the mistress at Hartfield, so the gossips got that wrong too. Not that I pay any of it any heed, I have to hear it from the missus before I know it to be true.’

‘There will be some big changes happening at Donwell in the months ahead,’ Master Knightly forewarned his steward. ‘How would you feel

about taking a closer management of things and moving into the gatehouse? Ben and his new wife could have your cottage.'

'Move into the gatehouse? Why, 'tis a bit grand there for us!'

'Oh, you'll do fine. Mistress Larkins can pick out new drapes and what furniture she needs. I should be glad to have you closer to the house to run things.'

'Well, I'm honoured, sir. And Ben would be as pleased as can be.'

'Talk it over with Mistress Larkins,' said Master Knightley in parting. He walked on, thinking he would go around by the mill. He would like to have Larkins closer to the house, it would fit in with his plans. Emma had yet to tell her father he had been removed as Guardian of Hartfield, but if Master Knightley were to move into Hartfield and offer to undertake the responsibilities of Guardian, Master Woodhouse would be none the wiser. He would not have to leave, and he would not suffer any distress. It was a perfect solution to the dilemma. The only difficulty remaining was to tell Master Woodhouse of the planned marriage, for as yet he did not know.

Master Woodhouse's nerves had not fully recovered from the shock of seeing Emma and Dame Baytes disappear into Faerie, and Emma returned without her hair.

Master Knightley thrust his hands into his coat pockets as he walked along, musing over how best to break the news to his future father-in-law. His hand found something deep in his right pocket, and he pulled it out to see.

'Dear me!' he exclaimed, recognising the folded note. It was the love letter he had taken from Robert Martin to give to Harriet Smith on Midsummer Eve. 'Did I tell her who the flowers were from?' he wondered aloud, stopping still to think back to that night. 'If not, then who did she think they were from? Dear me!' He swivelled round and marched toward the village.

'MASTER KNIGHTLEY,' just the person I was hoping to see. Mother Goodword looked different. She had a new glow about her, and she seemed younger and more vibrant, more magical.

'Congratulations again on your betrothal,' Mother Goodword said, ushering him into her parlour. 'Tea?'

'No, I thank you, both for the offer and for the congratulations.'

Mother Goodword smiled, and he blinked in the sudden feeling of basking in morning sunlight. 'You were one of my student's wards, Master Knightley.'

'Ah, yes. Sister Harriet.'

'She tells me you saved her life when she got herself into a misadventure in Faerie. That was most knightly of you.'

Master Knightley gave a modest bow of the head.

'I should like to take the liberty of asking you to help me in something else regarding Sister Harriet.'

'Oh?'

'Would you send your friend, Robert Martin to town on business.'

'To town? To Kingston?'

'No, to London. Sister Harriet is visiting at your brother's house, assisting with the children.'

'Ah, yes. Emma did speak of the arrangement. It was her own doing. And with regards to Sister Harriet and Robert Martin,' he pulled out the note and waved it. 'I find I have here a note from the young man to the young lady in question, which should have been given to her some time ago. It was to accompany some flowers he sent her by me, or rather, I took upon myself to deliver on his behalf.'

'I see. That does explain something that has caused no little confusion.' She took the note. But then handed it back. 'Give it to Master Martin to take to her himself. Send him to your brother on the grounds of business.'

'Bring them together? matchmake them?'

'Indeed. Then my work shall be done. A new beginning opens for us all.'

'Is Sister Harriet dropping her plans to become a Godmother? I thought the profession did not allow for marriage?'

'Typically, Godmothers do not marry. Not that it is forbidden, but it is difficult. But Harriet is to take a new position, one that does not include the direct use of magic. And her position is one where a practical, worthy young man would be a help and support, as well, one hopes, as a blessing.'

'I see. Well, there are no fathers and fathers-in-law in their case to cause complications,' said Master Knightley ruefully.

'I must warn you, Master Knightley, that there is rumour of a rogue stable brownie causing mischief in the village.'

'Oh?'

‘Master Coles’ brownie, to be precise. He was most upset by one of the donkeys in the stable being removed.’

‘I am sorry to hear it.’

‘It will fall under the jurisdiction of the Guardian of Hartfield to deal with the matter.’

‘So it will.’

‘Master Woodhouse will be alarmed to hear that there are reports of mischief. Pilfering and the like.’

‘He will be dreadfully alarmed. He thinks pilfering as bad as housebreaking.’

‘I should think he will be glad to have another man in the house. It would bring him peace of mind.’

‘I shall suggest it to him directly, Mother Goodword.’

‘He will be glad to have all his duties shared. It will lift a burden from him and bring him rest in his old age.’

‘I believe you are right, Mother Goodword. I shall certainly point out all the advantages of such a state to him.’

‘Take this,’ Mother Goodword said, taking a small jar of golden honey from her tea things. ‘Put a spoon in Master Woodhouse’s tea as you make all these suggestions. There is nothing like new fae honey to sweeten any conversation and make it amenable to the drinker.’

‘Thank you kindly.’ Master Knightley took the honey and bowed.

‘I bid you well, Master Knightley. You and all your family, those you have now and those who are to come.’

‘Thank you, Mother Goodword. And if my future family members are in need of a Godmother?’

‘Any Godmother would be pleased to help a Knightley.’

‘I do wonder,’ said Master Knightley as he pocketed the honey, ‘if my future wife will be pleased with our matchmaking today. I understand she was not encouraging of the scheme previously.’

‘Ah, but that was then. We have all seen a good deal of change since. I think you will find the future Mistress Knightley perfectly happy with the outcome.’

‘Magic and matchmaking,’ said Master Knightley, shaking his head. ‘Neither are an easy business. I am sure I should not be a Godmother for anything.’

‘It certainly is not for everyone, Master Knightley.’

WHAT WOULD BECOME OF HARRIET?

Rue marched across the fields, tiny fairies springing out of her determined path.

She reached the stables where Ben Larkins worked, giving him a perfunctory ‘Morning, Ben,’ as she passed him by.

‘Here!’ called out Ben, looking alarmed. ‘I don’t want any trouble.’

‘Trouble?’ Rue looked back in surprise.

‘Just you stop waving that wand about.’ He hastened to stand behind a wagon.

Rue looked at him and at her wand, her *glorious* new wand, and said, ‘I didn’t come for you, Ben. Anyways, I hear you’re getting wed, got a nice little cottage and everything. It all worked out, didn’t it?’

‘Well, yes, but I would sooner have not lived as a donkey all that time. Mind you,’ he admitted, moving a little way out from behind the wagon, ‘it has been good for business.’

‘Oh?’

‘I can understand how a donkey thinks. And that’s not very different from a mule or horse. Folks are saying I’m a marvel with horses now.’ He made half a smile, and Rue grinned back at him. ‘Business couldn’t be better. I’m getting all sorts of requests for help by rich folks with fancy horses. And they pay well.’

‘Excellent!’ cried Rue. ‘I’m right glad for you.’

‘So, I suppose I ought to thank you,’ he admitted, ‘and even that other Godmother, the one who near killed me with magic nuts, I suppose I have her to thank for me and Hannah getting wed. I wouldn’t have had the heart to go against Ma in marrying her, but when I thought I was going to die that

time, it made my mind up. I knew I wanted to be with Hannah no matter what. I asked her to marry me that same week.'

'I'm doubly right glad!' cried Rue. 'And if you have little 'uns in the future and you need some Godmother blessings—'

'Thank you, but no! I'm quite done with magic. So, what *are* you doing here, waving that wand about?'

'Looking for a tree sprite, one with a bushy tail and squirrel ears. Last time I saw him was here.'

'You mean that one?' Ben pointed at the pine tree where what looked like a very odd squirrel was garnering pinecones ready to throw.

'There you are,' cried Rue. 'I've come to turn you back! Look, I have a wand now! *Ouch!* Stop that! Why, you ungrateful wretch, I'm here to help you! Blasted Bullfrogs! Now I remember why I turned you into a squirrel in the first place!'



HARRIET WAS DELIGHTED by the pleasures of town. Gardens and balls and the theatre and shops and all manner of wondrous things. And Mistress Isabella Knightley was so very kind to her, and the children were the sweetest in all the world, although the boys could be a little noisy.

She pattered down the stairs, liking the feel of her new shoes. She had spent all her monthly allowance on new clothes, for one did feel that one ought to dress well when one went out and about in town. It was not like being in the country. Fortunately, her allowance had always been very generous.

'You look very pretty, Harriet,' Mistress Knightley approved. 'The carriage has just come round, and John has taken the boys to it already.'

Harriet was as excited as the two boys about the evening ahead – a circus show! She had never seen one before.

'Stop at The Winged Lion in Castle Street,' Master John Knightley called up to his coachman before the carriage set off.

'Why do you stop there, my love?' Mistress Knightley asked.

'I've invited an old friend of ours to join us,' said John Knightley.

Mistress Knightley would have enquired further, but one of the boys called her attention to the window and she forgot to ask before the carriage

stopped outside the Winged Lion, a lodging house in a pleasant part of town. The carriage door was opened, and a young man climbed in, removing his hat first, and took his seat beside Master Knightley.

‘Evening, Master Knightley, Mistress Knightley, evening Maid Smith. Thank you so much for your kind invitation.’

Harriet almost gaped in her surprise. ‘Master Martin! I did not know it was to be *you*.’

THE CIRCUS WAS REMARKABLE; Harriet had never seen anything like it. Robert Martin sat very near to herself in the box, with little Henry in between them. Master Martin seemed to enjoy the performance every bit as much as little Henry did, laughing heartily at the antics of the clown, with their tumbling about, and their little sparkles of magic, and being quite delighted with the wonderful tricks of horsemanship.

Harriet found herself watching Master Martin almost as much as she watched the ring below.

He looked very fine in his smart clothes; he looked quite the gentleman. And if his country accent gave him away as not being a native of town, it was a very pleasant accent, Harriet decided. There was something comforting about hearing the accent she had known all her life. And he really did have a delightful laugh, not too loud, like Sister Rue, or too shrill, like Mistress Elftyn, but a good, honest, hearty laugh. And how good he was with little John and Henry. Mistress Knightley had said to him that he would make a wonderful father one day, and he had replied that he hoped very much he could have sons half so fine as John and Henry, and Harriet was not absolutely certain, but she did think that he looked at her very quickly and gave a faint blush as he said this.

There was a very interesting incident as they were leaving Astley’s, for the crowd grew rather dense and rough, and Harriet quite feared for her life as she was pressed and pushed, and her gown trod on, and she was cut off from her party by the throng.

She could wish she were wearing Lady Stormont’s armour instead of her new striped muslin and thought that a crowd of rowdy revellers was almost as alarming as a flock of witch’s crows. Had she survived the black arts of sorcery only to be trampled to death at a circus? And just as her panic mounted to an unbearable degree of distress, suddenly, *he* was there!

– taking hold of her hand and saying, ‘Let me escort you, Maid Smith, it is a dreadful crush in here.’ And she was borne safely through the crowd, with Master Martin calling out, ‘Out of the way, sir! Mind the lady! Have a care, sir!’ to any who would come too near to her.

She felt quite faint with the alarm of it all, though she was not certain that some of the faintness was not due to the feel of Master Martin’s arm being very firmly about her waist as he guided her away from a pair of men who looked quite drunken and rough. When he placed her in the carriage and asked if she were well, and if she suffered any bruising or pain, she had said in almost a whisper, ‘I am well, Master Martin, you quite saved my life!’

As Robert Martin left the carriage that night, Master Knightley called after him, ‘Do come for a family dinner tomorrow, Robert.’

‘Yes, do,’ added Mistress Knightley.

Robert bowed to them all before the door was shut, but it was Harriet’s eye he held as he said, ‘I should be delighted. Until tomorrow.’ And then the carriage pulled away.

HARRIET FOUND herself wondering what Robert Martin’s favourite colour was as she looked over her gowns the next evening, deciding which to wear to dinner. After so much deliberation and changing of her gown and mind, she was a little late down, and Master Martin was already arrived, and was handing his hat and gloves to the footman.

‘Maid Smith,’ he said, with a bow. There was no one of the family about, so Harriet felt obliged to say, ‘Would you come into the sitting room, that is where the family wait until dinner is announced.’ And he had followed her in, but she was surprised to see that the room was empty.

‘Oh dear,’ she exclaimed, ‘I wonder where everyone is. I shall go and find Mistress Knightley.’ But Master Martin said, ‘Stay a minute, Maid Smith, if you would. I have something I wish to give you.’ And he pulled out a folded note, which looked as though it had lain crumpled up in his pocket for a good while.

‘This was to have been given you on your birthday in June, along with the flowers that Master Knightley was so kind to deliver. He forgot to give you this.’

Harriet opened the note with trembling hands and read with a beating heart and then spoke with a quivering lip. 'It was you?' she said in amazement. 'It was you who sent me the orchid?'

There was no time for any more talk, for little John came running in and gave a shout to see his friend Robert Martin come to play with him for the evening.

Harriet could barely eat her dinner. She was thinking over and over the words of the note, and feeling herself blush every time she thought of her error in thinking it was Master Knightley who loved her, then blushing again to think that it was really Robert Martin who loved her – loved her still, even after she had once refused him. His heart had never deviated from hers, he had always loved her, and had vowed in his letter that he always would.

When the boys had eaten their dessert and said goodnight and were taken away by their nurse, Master Knightley said he was just going to get some papers from his study for Robert to take back to his brother, and Mistress Knightley said she was just going to kiss the baby goodnight and would be down again directly, and Harriet and Robert Martin found themselves alone.

'Maid Smith,' said Robert, 'I go away again in the morning, back to Highbury.' There was a pause and Harriet stared down at her hands, not daring to look up, for he had moved from his own chair and come to sit next to her, except that he was not sitting down, but was unaccountably on one knee beside her chair, and she looked up in surprise, wondering what he was about.

'Maid Smith. Harriet. Dear Harriet. I know you refused me once before, and if you should refuse me a second time, I promise never to ask again – but no – I don't know if I can promise, for I don't think I can ever cease to hope to win your heart, Harriet. So, I ask you, will you give me any hope?'

Harriet hardly knew what she said in reply, she was trying hard not to give way to a dreadful bout of giggles in her nervousness – how Mistress Woodhouse would scold her if she were to giggle like a schoolgirl amid so serious a thing as a marriage proposal!

So she gulped a breath to stifle down the giggling, and spoke very quickly and almost abruptly in her desire to get her words out before she should laugh, so she only said very quickly, 'Oh! To be sure!'

And that was enough. And as Robert Martin saw fit to laugh with happiness, so she too felt at liberty to laugh, though she was very mindful of making it a ladylike laugh as best she could. A little breeze, like that of a wind sylph, blew through the dining room, and the scent of roses was very strong and sweet.

‘HAS HE ASKED HER?’ whispered Master Knightley to his wife, as they stood in the hall waiting. Mistress Knightley peeked in and said in a glad whisper to her husband, ‘I believe he has, for he is on his knees and has taken hold of her hands!’

‘So, we can go in now,’ said Master Knightley, ‘and feign surprise and give congratulations and so forth.’

‘Yes, my love, but wait. Just one moment more, for I think he is about to kiss her. Oh, how delightful this matchmaking business is, I could quite get used to it.’

THE END

A FEW MORE TOMORROWS

I hope you enjoyed this fairy-tale adventure!

In case you were wondering, Frank became the new owner of Ease Comely, and most of the servants were pleased to stay with him as their new master.

While preparing for his wedding, Frank revelled in his new freedom, riding Cobweb through the Island Gate into England, or, if that Gate should be closed, purchasing an entrance through the Royal Gate in London, then galloping respectively up or down the country to reach Highbury, to whisk Jane away for picnics and moonlight walks, and show off his bride-to-be to his father and all his Highbury friends.

They settled at Ease Comely, opening its gates and roads up to their neighbours, who had never safely passed through the gates in the two centuries it had been a sorceress's demesne.

Jane, who was of a more practical nature than her husband, took to supervising the magnificent gardens, growing plenteous crops of fruit and vegetables which commanded a high price as a Faerie export into England. This enabled Jane to redecorate her marital home to her heart's content, complete with nursery and music chamber, while Frank was free to breed fae horses and cut a very fine figure in his fashionable wardrobe, and to teach his sons to ride before they walked, much to the consternation of Nonny the nurse.

ROBERT MARTIN FOLLOWED the example of Master Knightley in moving into his new wife's home. Never again did a roof tile go un-repaired for more than a morning, nor a tradesman pass on an overpriced bill to the school, for he took over the accounts from his wife who struggled with numbers that were too large to count on her fingers.

He delighted Busie with new shelving in the laundry room, desisted from keeping a pet dog out of respect to Cloe-Claws, played his fiddle for the Maypole dancing practices, gave a class on woodwork, which was very popular with the students, ran his farm very well from a mile away, just as Master Knightley managed his estate from a mile away, and sought out a *Love's Wish* orchid for his wife's birthday every year without fail.

HARRIET MARTIN (nee Smith) was amazed every morning of her life that so many people should like her so very much, and grateful every evening that she was surrounded by real family at last.

She had a brother who was the nicest young man in the whole world, next to Robert. She had a husband who never came home from market without some gift of nuts or sweets or flowers. She had two sisters-in-law, a mother-in-law, nephews and nieces and, in time, a pair of children who had their father's practical nature and their mother's giggle, and were privileged to have Grand Godmother Dawn as a powerful Fairy Godmother.

MASTER WOODHOUSE FOUND, in time, that it was a relief to be free of the responsibilities of being the Wild Man, though he missed his Staff as a walking stick. He did gain a new walking stick that was almost comparable, and a new son-in-law who, though he never could be persuaded to eat gruel, yet never did eat sweet things in front of him. He also gained a new grandson, born less than a year after the little daughter of Mistress Weston was born. Emma would watch the babies playing together with a knowing smile, for she was quite sure she could foretell a future match when she saw one.

EMMA KNIGHTLEY (nee Woodhouse) never bore a heavy crown of braids again, which was a great relief, for the feeling of lightness on her head was very pleasant, and much more practical for running through the shrubbery or Donwell orchard, when her boy called for a game of hide-and-go-seek. Little Master Knightley was forbidden any toy bows, arrows, swords and pocket knives at Highbury, for his Grandfather's nerves could not bear them, but he enjoyed a fine collection of all things martial at Donwell. In time he discarded weapons for tools, as he shared in his father's enthusiasm for farming. He gained a couple of little sisters in due course, one of which was a better shot with a bow than him.

MISTRESS ELFTYN FOUND she could bear Highbury no more. Everything that could go wrong in a house, did go wrong in her house. Her neighbours shook their heads and said what could one expect when one drove a brownie from the house? Only bad luck could follow. The Elftyn's modernised their name to Elton and removed to the city of Bath where Mistress Elftyn's frogging and flounces received the praise they deserved, and good quality beauty charms could be had on every corner.

THE MARGOOL never did make a friend of Cloe-Claws, for he would keep eating all the fish, and though a charm was put on the pantry door to keep pilferers out, the magic did not work on him. A climax was reached at what Rue called 'The Great Sprat Spat'. An emptied dish of sprats, which Cloe-Claws considered her particular property, resulted in a spectacular melee of claws and scales and fur, in which the cat was the victor, and the margool never helped himself to sprats again. At least, not all of them.

AS FOR GODMOTHERS Rue and Myrtle, they went on to have new assignments, new adventures and meet lots of new people, and Myrtle finally discovered what a margool really was.

Read more about them in future books in the *Jane Austen Fairy Tales* series.

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